



Rose George, author of 'The Big Necessity,' to discuss issue of dealing with human waste

By Michael Scott, The Plain Dealer

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Nothing separates us more from the Third World than the way we treat our human waste.

That's how an official with the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District summed it up for me several years ago as we were lowered 350 feet beneath the city into Mill Creek Tunnel -- a massive \$200 million pipe that helps to keep more of our waste out of Lake Erie.

Except he didn't say "human waste," opting instead for that more common four-letter word (common, but rarely printed in a family newspaper).

Too bad, in this case at least, that we don't say the word, because it might force us to face a foul and unacceptable human-rights inequality.

That disparity in disposal is British journalist Rose George's passion.

"It's a total disgrace that in 2010, a child dies every 15 seconds from something as banal and mundane as diarrhea," George said in an e-mail interview last week.

She'll talk about her book "The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters" at a sewer district-sponsored free lecture at 7:30 p.m. March 23 at the Great Lakes Science Center. You will probably find it more than revolting -- but perhaps revolutionary as well.

You can't talk about changing the world without talking about human feces, according to George and other environmental activists trying to bring a modicum of dignity and a measure of health to an estimated 2.6 *billion* people around the world, nearly all in undeveloped countries.

"If people are still defecating in the open -- as two-thirds of the world's population still do -- then that water supply will soon be contaminated, along with the environment, and people and children will continue to ingest fecal particles, and diarrhea will continue to kill children," she said.

Installing a simple latrine, however, can reduce 40 percent of disease, compared with a 20 percent improvement from putting in a clean water supply.

"Sanitation is seen as something apart from other things, but in fact it's the cornerstone of nearly all development," she said. "Politicians should be pestered into putting sanitation up the agenda alongside clean water supply, where it belongs."

World Water Day: The need for sanitation may trump even efforts to bring clean water to the world, according to George, but that shouldn't diminish the efforts locally to make the upcoming March 22 World

Water Day more than just a vague idea.

A group of Northeast Ohio activists -- including Green City Blue Lake -- has teamed up with the city divisions of Water and Water Pollution Control for a "Drink Local. Drink Tap." campaign.

"We want to encourage people away from bottled water usage to drinking tap water as a way to reconnect them with Lake Erie and more sustainable practices," Pam Davis, a former environmental planner for the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency, said in an e-mail.

The group is also promoting the Cleveland International Film Festival's screening of "The Colony" on Friday, March 25, and Sunday, March 28 and a live Internet concert by local music group the Waterband from 7 to 9 p.m. Monday, March 22 (see waterband.com), and it will have a table at EarthFest on Sunday, April 18, at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo.

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