

What: Known Unknowns: The Problem with GMO Research –
A Presentation by Glenn Davis Stone

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Glenn Davis Stone is an anthropologist who studies the ecological, political, and cultural aspects of small farmers. His major research efforts have involved population, conflict, and the organization of production in Nigeria, and agricultural biotechnology in India. He is the incoming president of Anthropology & Environment, and Professor of Anthropology and Environmental Studies at Washington University, St. Louis.

Who: Although debates over genetically modified (GM) crops involve a wide range of societal issues, in some cases simple agronomic questions like yield advantage of a specific crop can take on great significance. This is particularly true of Bt cotton in India, which is a singularly important GM crop for small farmers and which remains highly controversial. Attempts by most analysts to isolate the impact of the transgenic trait have been mired in problems, and contradictory narratives have been widely accepted. Long-term ethnographic research can help to illuminate the impacts of Bt cotton, but this pivotal case ultimately has much to teach us about what we simply do not know.

Why: Bt cotton in India, which is a singularly important GM crop for small farmers and which remains highly controversial. Attempts by most analysts to isolate the impact of the transgenic trait have been mired in problems, and contradictory narratives have been widely accepted. Long-term ethnographic research can help to illuminate the impacts of Bt cotton, but this pivotal case ultimately has much to teach us about what we simply do not know.

How: Dr Stone deals both with research published by the agronomic industry and with individual farmers in India. He levels a critique of industry research in which he argues that it has failed to demonstrate the superiority of Bt cotton over a sufficient control crop.

It would be interesting to connect Dr Stone's critique with research making similar claims on behalf of genetically modified crops in 1) the US, and 2) in regions where the adoption of GMO seed has been less complete.