# The Commons Digest

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Welcome to the newest edition of *The Commons Digest*! In this issue we provide a small sample of what will be taking place in Edmonton, Canada, during the upcoming IASC XV biennial meeting. The *Commons Forum* begins with an essay from University of Waterloo students **Sajida Awan**, **Cheryl Chan**, and **Fatima Khan** with their essay focusing on the commons- future, present, and past, based upon interviews conducted with eleven commons "gurus." Their essay is followed by **Bonnie McCay's** text where she presents a retrospective on commons scholarship, focusing on, among other topics, the commons, conservation and community. Next, **Fikret Berkes** speaks to resilience, complexity, and socio-ecological systems. The Forum ends with **Ruth Meinzen-Dick's** essay on the links between scholarship on commons, policy and practice. All three speak from their own personal experiences and lengthy scholarship over years working with commoners and the commons.

This issue's *Commons Forum* is based upon an upcoming panel session at the meeting in Edmonton: "Communities, conservation and the commons: a retrospective." If you are interested in hearing more, please plan to attend the session Wednesday at 15.30 - 17. 00. The session is organized by Derek Armitage and based upon a class he ran together with Prateep Nayak at the University of Waterloo.

This issue also includes **Emily Castle's** list of Recent Publications as well as a number of announcements. ***Enjoy!***

## C O N T E N T S

### COMMONS FORUM: Reflections Upon Commons Scholarship, Policy and Practice

# Commons Forum

## *Reflections*

## A Dialogue on the Past, Present and Future of the Commons

**Sajida Awan, Cheryl Chan, and Fatima Khan**

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As young commons scholars taking a course called *Commons in a Changing World*, we began to realize that the "commons" encompasses complex ideas and an array of terms. Our curiosity inspired the creation of a new class activity and we decided that speaking to commons Gurus would provide valuable insight and further explanation. We reached out to a wide range of scholars with varying academic backgrounds and life experiences who contribute to this project.

In this article, we outline reflections from our collective engagement with eleven 'commons Gurus.' Our objectives were to: 1) understand the history of development and the current status of commons as a concept; 2) familiarize ourselves with the commons community; and 3) learn from the experience of the Gurus to gain a better understanding of the commons; and 4) to identify opportunities for future research using a commons perspective. The content of our semi-structured interviews with the eleven individuals pertained to the background of each

scholar; how their interest in the commons developed; their interpretation of how commons scholarship has changed over time; and what the future of commons scholarship may look like. From these interviews, three ideas that sparked our interest were: 1) the "commons" is a concept with a diverse range of interpretations; 2) the commons is evolving in a transdisciplinary world to incorporate new ideas, issues and methods; and 3) "new commons" are emerging and transcending the boundaries of traditional commons.

**Language of the Commons**

Each of the Gurus we spoke with had developed interest in the commons at different stages in their careers. It was interesting to discover that many of the gurus were introduced to the commons unintentionally. Some of the Gurus learned about the commons as Master's and PhD students, while others engaged with the commons outside of academia, working with communities. These different experiences greatly influence how Gurus use commons terminology. There is no one term that can fully capture the essence of the commons, though there are ideas that are often commonly shared. Gurus' responses related to definitions of commons conveyed ideas about shared resources, collective action, living together as communities, and also management and regulation of resources. The commons were also discussed in relation to collective problems and governance. The Gurus shared the understanding that commons is about people as much they are about resources and, most importantly, the relationship between the two. Language is a good indicator of how we think and understand the world. The language used to discuss the commons actively shapes


Alyne Delaney
Cattle grazing, Okavango Delta Ramsar Site, Botswana

individual perceptions of the commons. One of the scholars we spoke to, who does not claim to be a "commons guru" spoke about the commons with an emphasis on the "Commons" with a capital "C" when referring to it as a theory. Commons as a theory has been greatly influenced by the work of Elinor Ostrom who is recognized as having a significant influence on Commons scholarship. "Commons with a capital 'C' has been quite important in…helping us think systematically about institutions and the conditions in which they [either succeed or] fail." However, commons should not be recognized solely as a theory. One of the Gurus stated that the commons was an old idea or a concept that people have fully understood, at least informally, for as long as people have managed resources and access to resources.

**Current Status of Commons**

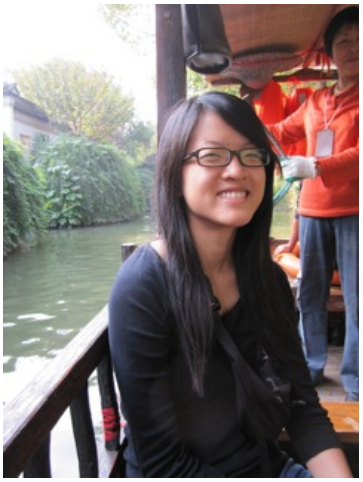
The Gurus recognize that commons literature has come a long way since the classic Tragedy of the Commons as discussed by Hardin in the early 1960s. Overtime, it has shifted from "a single resource focus to a systems focus." Additionally, the concept of the commons is being applied more broadly. Beyond local resource use conflicts, we are now exploring larger commons issues such as global climate change.


Picture provided by Sajida Awan

Sajida Awan

Commons scholars have already identified a whole range of different commons including formal and informal arrangements of managing commons which explains "who is responsible for what." Almost all the Gurus agreed that governing the commons is about involvement of everyone in the decision making process. Cross-scale and multi-scale linkages between different authorities and associated groups of people are very important at local, national and international levels in order to strengthen collective action to save common resources. For instance, the Ramsar Convention has declared many wetland commons as Ramsar sites. All the policies made to protect Ramsar sites involve authorities at the national level. There is often a missing link between local communities of the Ramsar sites and those who make decisions and formulate policies at national and international levels. The broader rules and regulations to manage Ramsar sites are consistent for sites around the world, but local conditions are different. The involvement of local people in decision-making offers better and sustainable ways of managing common resources. One of the commons scholars mentioned that local people have their own solutions to their problems and sometimes they are more comfortable in finding the solution themselves. Policy makers must consider their opinion in policy making at every level.

Another important point highlighted during these interviews was about the role of commons in a changing world and the importance of collective action for addressing some of the emerging global issues. For example, in one of Ostrom's final papers, she discussed an example of these global issues, such as climate change. Environmental changes, as presented by many scholars, not only impact the effective use of commons but also make it challenging to govern them. Collective action also highlights the importance of studying the commons in relation to other fields of study such as governance, resilience, and sustainability. Gurus also emphasized the importance of coordination, knowledge sharing, and collective effort between commons and other fields which can help in solving newly emerging global issues.


Picture provided by Cheryl Chan

Cheryl Chan

**Future of the Commons**

During our interviews, several Gurus discussed the future of the commons amidst fast paced technological innovations. In addition to the continued prominence of commons thinking in


Picture provided by Fatima (Noori) Kahn
Fatima (Noori) Kahn

natural resource management, it is also gaining popularity in new areas of study. Examples of alternative applications, referred to by some as the "new commons", include digital information commons (i.e., the internet), other knowledge commons (e.g., open-source technology), and genetic commons (e.g., agricultural seed banks). These technology-driven applications of the commons framework challenge conventional perspectives on excludability (i.e., the ability control resource access) and subtractability (i.e., the ability to subtract from the welfare of others). For instance, there are notable challenges to defining subtractability and exercising excludability in the digital world, where the Internet serves as an international platform for all forms of information to be shared en masse. Furthermore, questions arise over how excludability and subtractability as characteristics of commons can be distinguished from that of open access in the new commons. Finally, there are ethical considerations that play a role in dictating excludability for certain genetic (e.g., agricultural crop diversity, genome sequences) and knowledge commons (e.g., software codes, hardware blueprints).

Transparency and constructive debate on these unconventional commons would ensure that life-changing technologies are distributed equitably, and that all those with appropriate knowledge, skills, and capabilities have the collective opportunity to contribute to the advancement of these technologies. Yet, the practice of patenting in technological fields inherently supports privatization of important technological resources, thereby turning these non-tangible resources into private property regimes backed by financial and political interests. Further, the details of true open-source frameworks are uncertain, as the implications of these novel technological commons have not been tested in a political world bound by formal institutions. In June 2014, Elon Musk, chairman and CEO of Tesla Motors, made global headlines when he decided to release patents owned by the popular electric car corporation. While some lauded Musk's contribution to the open-source movement, many also remained skeptical of potential legal repercussions that would result from the use of these released patents. These select skepticisms illustrate the underlying conflicts between *de jure* and *de facto* property arrangements. Therefore, careful definition, or rather, redefinition of the commons framework for application to the "new commons" remains an important next-step in the study of the commons.

**Conclusion**

Our interviews encouraged us to reflect and debate on the past, present, and future issues in the study of the commons. Our interview activity concluded with the understanding that there are many different definitions of the commons, and explaining the commons can be difficult due to its interaction with complex systems. Through these interviews, we

have come to realize that the "Commons" is a truly complex process with many uncertainties. Additionally, the gurus are unsure where the future of the commons is headed. We hope that these findings will contribute to more effective transdisciplinary communication about the commons. While respecting academic efforts in commons scholarship, it is evident that we have not arrived at answers to all the pressing questions of the commons and that new avenues of research are emerging. As fledgling scholars, we have truly enjoyed engaging with the Gurus and undertaking this interview process. This project has not only enriched our knowledge of the commons, but has also showed us that "people who work on the commons are [nice people]", as mentioned in one of our interviews.

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## Notes Toward a Retrospective on Commons Scholarship

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A quick summary of points I would like to make: I would reiterate early criticisms of "the commons" as defined solely by open access, but add an understanding that removes the defining focus on "property" (McCay 1996). Second, I acknowledge the rise in scholarship on the contested and complicated nature of "conservation" and would like to reflect on how commons scholarship contributes to the debates about it, but may not get to this topic here. As for "community" I would point to the absorption of the concept into broader constructs in the focus on socio-ecological systems, resilience, and so forth. It is this last that has taken over the essay.

I have been engaged with the general topic of "the commons" for more than four decades. Garrett Hardin's Science article "The tragedy of the commons" got my attention as it did many others' soon after its publication in 1968 (Hardin 1968). I started graduate studies at Columbia University in 1969, and, interested as I was in hunter-gatherers-fishers, thought it could be helpful in framing my doctoral research. That turned out to be set in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, with descendants of English and Irish migrants, not native Americans, and commercial fishers not subsistence hunter-gatherers---but fishers they were, and as we all know the tragedy of the commons is classically the "fisherman's problem" (McEvoy 1986). On my way driving across the province to a meeting of Canada's Learned Societies at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland in June 1971, I tuned into CBC radio and heard an interview with Percival Copes, an economist attending the meetings. He

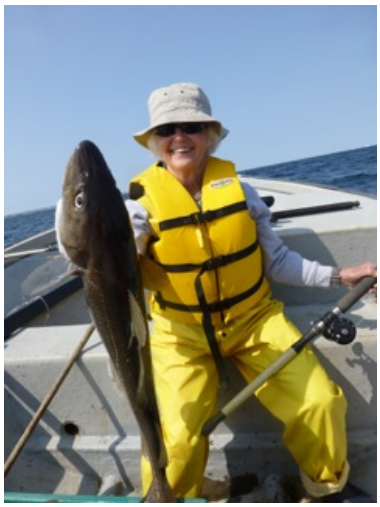
talked about how the "open access" condition of Newfoundland's fisheries contributed to the poverty of the fishers, and how improvement in their condition would depend on finding ways to make it harder for people to enter the fisheries—an opinion he much later revised, by the way (Copes 1986). His opinion then—standard in economics then and for the most part now--dovetailed nicely with Hardin's thinking, and I was off and running with plans for research. What were the interactions between human populations and their environments in conditions of open access, which seemed to characterize the situation of rural coastal Newfoundland in the 1970s?

Between October 1972 and August 1974 I lived on Fogo Island and carried out dissertation research; it was a time when the fisheries were a disaster---fish, especially cod, were scarce-- and the communities barely hanging on, many people on welfare and men away working in the iron ore business in Labrador or in Canada's cities. However, two things that led one to rethink the applicability of a simple "open access" or "tragedy of the commons" were evident. First, the collapse of the northern cod stock (*Gadus morhua*) probably had little to do with the "open access" enjoyed by Newfoundland fishers but rather from unfettered access to the same fish stocks for huge fishing trawlers from the Soviet Union, Germany, and other parts of the world. It was open access and worse: the "freedom of the seas" kind enshrined in the Law of the Sea, which at that time gave coastal nations little more than 12 miles of exclusive jurisdiction (and often only 3 miles, or less when the coast guard was not looking).

And second, the paradigms of economists and game theoreticians studying social dilemmas of the "commons" type had little to do with the dynamics and realities of human communities. Fogo Island was the site of several amazing ventures in community development—through community-oriented film-making and applications of the principles of "appropriate technology" and workers' cooperatives—which helped local families and communities get through the disastrous collapse of the cod fish stocks of the early 1970s (one that presaged that of the early 1990s, but that's a later story (Finlayson and McCay 1998)). In modern terms, they were sources of resilience.

At the time, systems theory was fashionable, both in its cybernetic forms and in the more imaginative form of "world systems theory" of Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein 1974) and the "dependency" theorizing of Andre Gunder Frank (Gunder Frank 1966) and others. Although my initial intellectual framework was the cybernetic form, embraced by anthropologists in studies of tribal groups as a way to understand and account for otherwise strange customs (e.g., (Rappaport 1967)), it was the critical work on how different parts of the world related to the dominance of centers of capitalism that helped me develop a "political ecology" critique of the Newfoundland fisheries problem as it was experienced by Fogo Islanders (McCay 1976). And of course political ecology is central to commons theorizing, including the basic notion that in addition to 'tragedies of the commons' there can be 'tragedies of the commoners,' those who lose access to common pool resources.

Today, systems theory has been resurrected in part through the work of commons scholars. Elinor Ostrom in



Roger R. Locandro

Bonnie McCay with her catch in the waters of Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Canada

particular gets credit for popularizing the notion of "socio-ecological systems," complete with an acronym, SES (Ostrom 2009). But many commons scholars, led by people we know well, like Fikret Berkes and Carl Folke (e.g., (Folke, Hahn et al. 2005), have been working on the problem of understanding adaptive governance of complex systems, a far cry from the models of Hardin, the resource economists, and, to be fair, the game theorists. The construct of "coupled natural and human systems" (CNH) has attracted researchers as well, through the US National Science Foundation's periodic call for interdisciplinary work framed by the idea of coupled systems. This usually involves heavy-duty modeling, and it isn't always evident that the contributions of social scientists, including commons specialists, are fully integrated with those of natural and physical scientists. However, the opportunity is there, with intriguing questions about non-linear processes (Liu, Dietz et al. 2007) and, for me, the nature of "coupling," which is certainly a term from mechanical engineering.

In the simple sense, the idea of coupling should call for tracing the materials, energy, and information that flow from one component to another, in our models from the 'natural' to the 'human' or 'cultural' and back. But more to the point, as in mechanical structures, it involves translation from one system to another, via gears or whatever. That is where information becomes particularly interesting: what "signals" about the condition of system A are received and acted upon by system B? We have used this framework to consider and compare responses to environmental change in different fisheries, in an early effort to tease out the conditions that lead to responses that worsen the situation—the old "positive feedback" of cybernetic systems—or those that are corrective—the old "negative feedback" (McCay, Weisman et al. 2011). As Cash, Berkes and others have pointed out, though, in complex systems, the cross-scale linkages must be accounted for (Cash, Adger et al. 2006), and thus seemingly corrective responses at one level can be canceled out by actions at other scales.

The simplest way of translating this into 'commons' talk is that what the villagers come up with as ways to manage the alpine pastures may not matter so much when anthropogenic climate change results in loss of pasture quality—a lesson that is startlingly clear in many fisheries, where warming is resulting in often rapid shifts of species ranges, often out of sync with the fisheries and fisheries management institutions involved (McCay 2012, Pinsky and Fogarty 2012). On the other hand, and less obviously, small-scale efforts—exercised through common property institutions perhaps, especially if we consider environmental movements so constituted--can add up to large-scale corrective outcomes, as Rudel has argued in his recent study of environmentalists and forest dynamics (Rudel 2013).

These shifts in emphasis and attention include a focus on resilience, institutionalized through the creation of the Resilience Alliance by Folke, Berkes, and others out of the Beijer Institute, and represented now in a huge and growing body of theory and empirical application (Berkes, Colding et al. 2003, Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003, Olsson, Folke et al. 2004, Walker, Holling et al. 2004). My early research in Newfoundland was inspired by the notion of resilience coming from theorizing in ecology (Slobodkin and Rapoport 1974), concerning optimal processes of response to threats to survival. The message was basically being thrifty about what you do to cope with a problem, so that you do not use up your reserves and hence your capability to cope with new problems. I adopted this framework to examine the situation on Fogo Island, in response to decline in cod landings in the late 1960s and early 1970s. My "political ecology" answer was that a combination of government policy and business machinations led the islanders to adopt a response strategy that was not optimal, in those terms, making them ever more vulnerable to problems in the fishery (McCay 1976).

The recent flurry of research on vulnerability in relation to resilience and recovery from environmental changes and, indeed, major hazards like hurricanes and earthquakes is very impressive. It is tinged with notions of equity and scale that reflects interest in 'the commons' and benefits from analyses of political, economic, logistic and other factors that warp responses, sometimes leading to perverse and costly outcomes. It also includes explicit attention to social capital as a source of resilience, a topic that is central to commons scholarship as well. We recently completed a study of fishing communities that experienced extensive damage from Hurricane Sandy, of October 2012, and found various expressions of social capital in the stories we were told. Our graduate students focused in on the role of narratives in resilience (Oberg, Flagg et al. forthcoming), and I am emboldened by that to suggest this as important to commons scholarship more generally.

Let us admit that the choice of focusing on the commons is itself an ethical, moral one, and that research about the commons constitutes narratives that convey certain moral and ethical messages. Certainly this was true for Hardin's "tragedy of the commons"—where a mere phrase carried immense narrative power used to justify neo-liberal solutions. We've looked for revised metaphors—"comedy of the commons," "romance of the commons," "drama of the commons," – to convey other perhaps more complicated sets of messages and alternative economies. It is up to another generation of scholars beyond mine to engage in reading the narratives of the commoners and the commons and finding their compelling messages.

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# Retrospective on the Commons: Managing Complex Social-Ecological Systems

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The area of commons has experienced major changes and continues to evolve as most scholarly fields do. Commons theory has undergone a major transformation since the 1980s, abandoning Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" (TOC) metaphor, with its "economically rational" herders and their short-term, self-interested thinking. The TOC, once thought as "the model" for all commons, has been replaced by theories based on the idea that resource users are capable of self-organization and self-regulation if there is communication, trust and reciprocity (Ostrom 2005). Research in the 1990s and 2000s mainly focused on institutions for commons use, and on defining the conditions that lead to solutions. The 2010s saw the emergence of the "new commons" literature, with a focus on knowledge commons and others. The purpose of this article is to reflect, forward and backward, on the state of the commons. My primary argument is that commons research has been evolving from laboratory-like community-based approaches to those dealing with commons management as complex systems problems in a rapidly changing social-ecological environment.

The major transformation in the 1980s was a paradigm change. Kuhn's (1962) classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* postulates that in science, a dominant model or theory (paradigm) persists until the accumulation of new evidence forces a re-appraisal and rejection of the old paradigm and the formulation of a new one. This is exactly what happened in the case of commons theory. Hardin had argued that users of a commons are caught in an inevitable degradation process that leads to the destruction of the resources on which they depend. But this is simply not so in many cases. Exceptions to the Hardin model come from all parts of the world, covering various cultures and kinds of commons. It did not take long for a consensus to emerge that Hardin's model applied to open-access conditions but not for commons in general. In fact, Hardin's own example of the imaginary English pasture was historically incorrect. The medieval English and Scottish commons were generally used under locally devised regulations. For example, "stinting" rules limited the number of heads of animals that each owner was allowed to graze on the village pasture. There were elaborate rules of behavior for commoners to ensure that the common good was respected and protected (Menzies 2014).

Consistent with the behavior of real commoners from around the world, the post-Hardinian literature re-conceptualized common property as a social process, for example, in making and enforcing resource use rules and enforcing them. These social relations often lead to management problem solving and the

formulation of practical rules-in-use or institutions (Ostrom 1990). Much commons research in the 1980s and the 1990s sought the simplicity of community-based resource management cases and commons experiments to develop theory. The strategy of using local-scale commons cases was effective, since "the process of self-organization and self-governance are easier to observe in this type of situation than in many others" (Ostrom 1990: 29).

However, the simple commons model has limitations. In reality communities use multiple resources, and resource boundaries tend to be complex; as well, resources are often used by competing user-groups. Commons studies addressing such issues started appearing mainly in the 1990s (Meinzen-Dick and Bakker 1999; Steins and Edwards 1999). Such studies hastened the evolution of commons research into a truly interdisciplinary field to deal with complexities, borrowing concepts and tools from political science, economics, anthropology, sociology, geography, applied ecology and others, addressing multiple resource management domains: forestry, fisheries, wildlife, protected areas, surface and groundwater, "new commons" and others. Dealing with multiple factors or components and their interactions, commons research increasingly sought to address aspects of complex adaptive systems, such as self-organization, non-linearity, uncertainty and scale (Berkes et al. 2003). In effect, the widespread use of the term, social-ecological system, implicitly recognizes that we are dealing with integrated complex systems that include social (human) and ecological (biophysical) subsystems in a two-way feedback relationship (Berkes et al. 2003). Scale issues, one of the characteristics of complex systems, have long been a part of commons analysis. For example, Brondizio et al. (2009: 253) point out that "no fixed spatial or temporal level is appropriate for governing ecosystems and their services sustainably, effectively and equitably." Rather, governing social-ecological systems requires recognizing their multi-level nature.

We know a great deal about the conditions under which community-based management may or may not work (Dietz et al. 2003; Ostrom 2005). Commons theory is sufficiently developed to enable prediction at the local level. However, local commons are embedded in a multi-level world. Drivers originating at other levels of social and political organization can have various effects on the community level. Globalization has a major impact on commons management, for example, through the creation of international markets and speeding up resource exploitation that can sweep across geographical regions (Berkes et al. 2006).

So the challenge for commons research is to move to the analysis of complex commons, multi-level in both space and time, with interplay at various levels (Young 2002). Can a theory of the commons, originally based on local-level cases, be scaled up to deal with complexities at multiple levels? Is the theory applicable to regional and global commons? I had a chance to reflect on this as part of a team project, Sustainable Canada Dialogues, involving a network of some 65 scholars across Canada regarding the issue of climate change https://www.dropbox.com/s/alp59e37hazywm4/EN_15mars_17H_hires.pdf?dl=0

At first, the task seemed simple. Ostrom and others had demonstrated that

commons management is quite workable under conditions of good communication, trust, and reciprocity. Ostrom developed principles for collective action -- any action taken together by a group of people whose goal is to achieve a common objective (Olson 1965). These principles were detailed in her 1990 book *Governing the Commons*, the centerpiece for her 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. Such approaches for managing local commons surely had implications for managing global commons as well, for example, for reducing greenhouse gases?

However, the issue is not that simple. Managing global commons is not quite the same as local-level commons (Young 2002). Dietz et al. (2003) and Stern (2011) have analyzed this question and concluded that some of the Ostrom principles apply at the global level but others do not. Nevertheless, it seems that global commons management still requires that countries cooperate toward collective action.

Canada, among others, continues to increase greenhouse gas emissions by pursuing a policy of developing and exporting fossil fuels, in particular a low-grade heavy oil known as tar sands. Canadian politicians continue to argue that this policy is economically rational -- precisely the kind of short-term, self-interested thinking that leads to Hardin's TOC. Current commons theory tells us that this logic cannot work because it violates the preconditions of communication, trust and reciprocity for collective action. Without collective action, a country like Canada may hope to become a "free rider" (Olson 1965) among cooperating nations. Or more likely, Canada's and others' "economically rational" energy policies would result in a TOC for all.

As in the case of local commons, nation states need to be good global citizens and buy into global common responsibility. This way, the global community of nations can start addressing the problem, as previously done with the ozone depleting substances, and (partially) with acid rain and oil pollution in oceans. Of course, we cannot overlook the fact that climate change is a particularly complex problem and closely connected, with two-way feedback loops at various scales, to sustainability of forests, agriculture, cities and other parts of our global social-ecological system.

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# Reflections on the Commons: Scholarship to Policy and Practice

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Let me begin by saying what an honor it is to be invited to give reflections, along with Bonnie McCay and Fikret Berkes—two of the great scholars in this field. My own work has been able to build on their research and that of other scholars, but has focused more on the interfaces between scholarship, policy, and practice. Some refer to this as "research into use"; I prefer to think of each informing the other. Certainly the rich body of research on the commons (the Digital Library of the Commons is approaching 10,000 items!) has informed policy and practice on the commons, but I would also argue that the struggles of applying principles to policy or practice can and should contribute to even richer scholarship on the commons.

I first heard of the "tragedy of the commons" while researching my undergraduate thesis on pastoral land tenure in Africa, and used the term "political ecology" to argue that cultural ecology explanations of understanding people's land use were incomplete without looking at the role of the state in creating tenure (in)security. In my graduate work, I was fortunate to be part of a vibrant interdisciplinary group working on irrigation management. It was the early days of studies of "farmer managed irrigation systems", and it was exciting to find considerable farmer organization in India, even within systems that were nominally state-run.

The work by Walt Coward, Norman Uphoff, Robert Chambers, Robert Wade, Elinor

Ostrom and many others who used case studies and meta-synthesis to demonstrate the effectiveness of farmer-managed irrigation challenged state-dominated irrigation development patterns, especially as the shortcomings of government irrigation agencies became apparent. But it was the fiscal crisis of the state in the late 1980s and 1990s that prompted policy reforms to formally involve organized water users in irrigation management through "Participatory Irrigation Management" programs or even "Irrigation Management Transfer" programs that passed greater responsibility for systems to water users' associations.

Similar reforms devolving responsibility—and some rights over resources—to user groups were taking place in other natural resource sectors, notably fisheries co-management and Joint Forest Management. This provided exciting opportunities for those of us working on each resource to learn from the other (e.g. Meinzen-Dick et al. 2001)—something that has been a hallmark of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC).

Unfortunately, the policy pendulum swung too far, too fast. Programs of "Irrigation Management Transfer" sought to solve many of the problems of poor performance of government irrigation systems by devolving responsibility to thousands of Water Users' Associations (WUAs). Not surprisingly, these externally organized associations did not perform as well as self-organized systems, and failed to meet the admittedly inflated expectations that devolution to farmers would both reduce the cost to the state and improve the performance of poorly-maintained systems. Joint Forest Management seems


Carroll Dick

Ruth Meinzen-Dick revisiting her first commons field site in India, after 25 years

to have fared better, especially where it was seen as "adaptive co-management" with roles for the state and communities and an explicit commitment to social learning (Armitage et al. 2008). Yet that is a difficult concept to convey to many policymakers, who want relatively straightforward prescriptions, not something that has to be adapted to each situation and changed over time. While there are some committed government staff, NGOs, and donors who are willing to invest in "crafting" institutions, that is an expensive and expertise-intensive approach; most would prefer institutions that can be replicable and manufactured "at scale."

One of the problems with devolution policies has been that they have devolved responsibilities, but not always rights over resources. The commons often occupy a nebulous legal status, officially held by the state, with little official recognition of the rights of the commoners (Wily 2011). This tenure insecurity reduces the authority and incentives of resource users to invest in the resource, and has also made the commons vulnerable to expropriation and "land grabs", which compounds the problems of potential free riding and internal governance of the commons that have been the subject of so much commons research.


Alyne Delaney

Ruth Meinzen-Dick and Laura Dick at the Hyderabad IASC Conference, in 2011

Fortunately, there are practitioners and activists who are working to improve the external recognition and internal management of the commons. One of the most exciting projects for me has been to work with Juan Camilo Cardenas and Marco Janssen, who have great experience in using experimental games to study the factors that affect collective action. In our current project, we are examining whether these games can also be used as an intervention to strengthen collective action for water management—surface irrigation in Colombia and groundwater in Andhra Pradesh, India. The latter is with Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), the NGO whom many of you know as the host of the 2011 IASC conference in Hyderabad, which not only works with over 8,000 villages in India to improve management of the commons, but also at the state and national levels to improve policies on the commons. I realize that in some fields, applied work is less prestigious than theory, but work on the commons demonstrates that bringing these together enriches both.

One of the hallmarks of commons scholarship has been Interdisciplinarity—people who understand the resource working with social scientists who (try to) understand the human and institutional side. The applied nature of much of the commons work has pushed us to look beyond disciplinary boundaries in many research projects. I would also credit the IASC for providing a forum to bring together different disciplines. Looking forward, we will need to continue to involve ecologists and experts on the resources, as well as a wide range of social scientists (economists, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and political scientists, for starters). But to influence policy and its implementation, we need to involve more lawyers and campaigners, and if we are to reach out to broader audiences to build a constituency for the commons, we also need to bring in journalists and others who can help us explain the richness and complexity of the commons to broader audiences.

I have written this essay during the International Land Coalition meetings in Dakar, Senegal, where 150 civil society and intergovernmental organizations from 54 countries endorsed a declaration that made explicit mention for the need for common property, and supporting a global call to action for indigenous and community land rights. Where research on the commons connects with social movements, there is scope to shape policies and narratives that enhance, rather than undermine, the commons.

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# Announcements

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**Be part of IASC!**

IASC is itself a commons, and depends on its membership dues for many of the critical activities it undertakes. Become a member! https://membership.iasc-commons.org/

Suscribe to the newsletter! Tell a friend! The newsletter is the easiest way to receive all the news about the association. Contact us at iasc@iasc-commons.org to post announcements - conferences, job positions, etc. - and reach the +3K members of our community: https://membership.iasc-commons-org/civicrm/profile/create?gid=12&reset=1

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**The Vol 9, No. 1 (2015) of the International Journal of the Commons is available on line**

Special feature - Challenges of critical institutionalism.

We kindly invite you to take a look at the table of contents at: http://www.thecommonsjournal.org

Our special issue section is dedicated to

challenges of critical institutionalism, and was guest-edited by Frances Cleaver and Jessica de Koning.

Follow the discussion on the LinkedIn group page of the IJC: https://www.linkedin.com/grp/home?gid=3456210

**Ostrom's theory into practice in the Mexican state of Baja California Sur**

Available from the PNAS open access site (http://www.pnas.org/content/112/19/5979.abstract), the paper is a first stab at operationalizing Ostrom's social-ecological systems in a spatially explicit, quantitative manner. Here, they use the case of small-scale fisheries in Baja California Sur, Mexico, to identify distinct SES regions and test key aspects of coupled SESs theory. Regions that exhibit greater potential for social-ecological sustainability in one dimension do not necessarily exhibit it in other, highlighting the importance of integrative, coupled systems analyses when implementing spatial planning and other ecosystem-based strategies.

A press release for this piece can also be found at http://www.futurity.org/sustainability-baja-california-sur-909012/

**Tenure Track Faculty Position at the University of Maine in Marine Policy**

The University of Maine is seeking to fill a tenure track assistant professor position in marine policy. We seek a social scientist from any discipline interested in marine and/or coastal issues. The successful candidate is expected to begin in 2016. Review of applications will begin July 1, 2015, and will continue until the position is filled.

For more details about the position or how to apply, please see full ad at https://umaine.hiretouch.com/job-details?jobID=24289.