**The Commons**

***Introduction***

Textbooks define “*Tragedy of the Commons”* as the depletion or degradation of a potentially renewable resource to which people have free and unmanaged access. The over use of our natural resources by people is a common topic in environmental science. The availability of clean air, water and soil has decreased dramatically the last 100 years as the population climbed to over 6 billion people. The lost of undisturbed lands, biodiversity and other natural resources as the population grew and spread to cover much of the land has dramatically affected many species. Below is a short explanation of Easter Island

Easter Island (Rapa Nui) is a small island, isolated in the South Pacific. It was colonized by the Polynesians about 2,500 years ago. The civilization they developed was based on the island’s towering palm trees, which were used for shelter, tools, fishing boats, fuel, food, rope, and clothing. Using these sources, they developed an impressive civilization and a technology capable of making and moving large stone structures, including their famous statues. However, they used up the island’s precious trees faster than they were generated. Once the trees were gone, the islanders could not build canoes for hunting porpoise and catching fish. Without the forest to absorb and slowly release water, springs and steam dried up, exposed soil eroded, crop yields plummeted, and famine struck. When the Dutch explorers first reached the island, they found only 2,000 inhabitants, struggling under primitive conditions on a mostly barren island, the starving people turned to warfare and possibly cannibalism. The islanders had lived an unsustainable lifestyle, where they had taken advantage of their resources, when they didn’t manage their food or natural resources they fell on hard times.

Can we relate what is happening on earth today to what happened on Easter Island over 500 years ago? Read on for further discussion on the Tragedy of the Commons and other examples. If you know of other examples you would like to see included in this handout, feel free to contact me, Kevin Bryan, at [www.thegreenpath.net](http://www.thegreenpath.net).

**What is the Commons?**

The "commons" is any resource which is shared by a group of people, cities, states or countries. Such things as the air we breathe and the water we drink come from commons. In many parts of the world; new land for farming and grazing land for stock, fish from the sea, and wood for fuel and housing are treated as commons.

**What is the Logic of the Commons?**

The "logic of the commons" is as follows: Each country has the right to take resources from and put wastes into the commons. To accumulate wealth, each country believes that it can acquire one unit of resources or dump one unit of waste while distributing one unit of cost across all of the countries with whom the commons is shared. Thereby, the gain to the country appears large and the cost very small. Some countries accumulate wealth more rapidly than others and this, in turn, gives them the means to access an even larger share of the commons.

The problem in the logic of the commons lies in the failure to recognize that all countries are attempting to do the same thing. Thus, on average, one unit of gain for a country actually produces a net one unit of cost for each country. However, selfish countries accumulate wealth from the commons by acquiring more than their fair share of the resources and paying less than their fair share of the total costs. Ultimately, as population grows and greed runs rampant, the commons collapses and ends in "the tragedy of the commons".

**How does the Commons work?**

The logic of the commons breaks down when resources decline and/or population grows too large. Consider the following example: Fourteenth century Britain was organized as a loosely aligned collection of villages, each with a common pasture for villagers to graze horses, cattle and sheep. Each household attempted to gain wealth by putting as many animals on the commons as it could afford. As the village grew in size and more and more animals were placed on the commons, overgrazing ruined the pasture. No stock could be supported on the commons thereafter. As a consequence of population growth, greed, and the logic of the commons, village after village collapsed.

An apparent solution to avert the collapse of the commons was the introduction of private ownership. Common lands were parceled up into small tracts, each owned by a household. If a household greedily destroyed its plot, its demise was its own fault. However, as population grew, each new generation of households was left with a smaller and smaller portion of the original holdings. And, there was still the opportunity for some households to accumulate wealth by acquiring land from others, one way or another. Thus, private ownership did nothing to control greed. It merely shifted to a new arena. The number of landless households grew rapidly, each one descending deeper and deeper into abject poverty.

Commons other than land were not so easily parceled up. How could anyone own rain, wind, and the open ocean? The logic of the commons still prevails today for: fishing rights in coastal and open waters; roads and highways for travel and commerce; and a standing military for defense of territory.

The logic of the commons also includes a much more sinister element. As an example, consider the following episode:

"After the Civil War, the cattlemen in Edwards County, Texas overstocked the land, and when settlers started showing up in the 1880s, the cattlemen's answer was to crowd even more animals onto the land. At a stockmen's meeting, they produced: 'Resolved that none of us know, or care to know, anything about grasses, native or otherwise, outside of the fact that for the present, there are lots of them, the best on record, and we are after getting the most of them while they last.' (D. Duncan, MILES FROM NOWHERE, Penguin Books, 1994, pg. 145)."

Thus, we have cases of deliberate destruction of the commons to not only get the wealth out of it before someone else does, but also to leave nothing for others. Often, this has involved the ruin of other commons resources along with the ones sought after. The history of the quests for gold and whales are other examples. These kinds of episodes reflect instances of pure greed.

The commons is an ancient cultural and economic organizing principle. Before the agricultural revolution, each clan or tribe staked out a territory and all members had the right to hunt and gather within it. They often did so cooperatively. This worked well as long as their territory could be held, the commons was vast, and the relative population was small. Before the agricultural revolution, a commons tragedy was rare. It usually involved declining resources due to natural events, such as ice-ages. The tragedy of the commons has become more and more frequent since the agricultural revolution and its concomitant population growth. Its frequency has accelerated with the industrial revolution and the resultant population explosion. Now, the commons includes the whole Earth.

**Why does the Commons continue?**

In addition to the obvious (land, water, and air), much of our world is still treated as a commons today. In many cases, resources from these commons are no longer free for the taking. Dumping our wastes into the commons is not as free as it once was. One must pay a fee or be licensed to get access to the commons. In some cases, how much one can take away or dump into the commons is managed and/or regulated. But, all around the world; fisheries, wood, national parks, highways, parking and many other resources are commons just the same. Access to them merely requires a desire to do so and sufficient means.

Population growth, greed, and the logic of the commons has virtually destroyed the world’s ocean fisheries and the Amazon rain forest. Huge tracts of land have succumbed to desertification. Crowding overwhelms Yosemite National Park and the freeways and parking facilities in our big cities. The accumulation of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere is precipitating significant global warming which will produce climate change. A significant loss of biodiversity is underway; some call it a mass-extinction event.

Although international negotiations on managing the global commons for a sustainable yield continue, progress toward resolution is nil. Selfish points of view dominate the discussion. Particularly intractable is control of population growth. The freedom to breed has been called "the second tragedy of the commons". Without population-growth control, greed and the logic of the commons makes a global-wide tragedy of the commons inevitable.

Answer the following questions: (you may use the back of this page or your own paper)

1. What is a commons? Why do they get over-used?
2. Why are “tragedies of the commons” more likely today than they were before the industrial revolution?
3. Give 3 examples of a commons that are not listed in this handout. Explain why they qualify as a commons, and who is most likely to use (or over-use) them.
4. What are the most effective solutions to the tragedy of the commons?