

Studies in Human Ecology and Adaptation

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Global Perspectives on Long Term Community Resource Management

With a Foreword by Carole L. Crumley

 Springer

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Foreword

This book examines the aspects of the contemporary and historic management of resources held in common. The very existence of such management strategies runs counter to the long-held assertion that they are obsolete and must be removed from local management and subjected to state, corporate, or other external controls. A brief look at the not-so-distant history of this view can provide context for this important volume.

It may surprise some readers that the main point of Garrett Hardin's 1968 *Science* article 'The Tragedy of the Commons' is that *overpopulation* is the chief source of environmental degradation, not that communities are incapable of sustained management of the commons. At the time of its publication, the article was the focus of an enormous controversy about what was soon referred to as the 'population bomb' (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1968). In the same period, but with a broader perspective more characteristic of contemporary opinion, the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) argues that the number of humans is only part of the larger problem: the Earth's resources are finite.

Concerns of the tumultuous late 1960s to early 1970s reflect a long struggle to define the role of humanity in the degradation and depletion of resources. Which elements of society are at fault? For some, the 'overpopulation question' was key to a solution. It was also an opportunity to revisit the early twentieth-century ideas of progress and social engineering, the fundamental assumptions guiding the policies of Western nation-states (Scott 1999).

In the early twentieth century, the tenets of nationalism and of scientific racism proved particularly compatible, offering a solid justification for colonialism, class privilege, and persecution of minorities. Equally attractive was the argument that Europe and North America were doubly blest with the world's most intellectually invigorating climate and its most enlightened population.

In shifting blame away from the colonists and onto the colonized, Hardin's argument echoed the earlier concern about overpopulation. But it also cemented the idea that aside from the progressive, competitive West, the human impact on resources was the result of an outdated strategy of collaboration.

The rise of eugenics (the application of the principles of selective animal breeding to humans) between the two World Wars coincided with the apogee of Western domination of subject peoples and countries all over the globe in the name of progress, with a potent subtext of racism. In Germany, National Socialism adopted a suite of ideas that combined geographical determinism (drawing on Tacitus' *Germania*), cultural determinism (promoting the work of the linguist and archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna), and genetic determinism (the idea that human social and behavioural qualities are manifest in the form of 'racial character'). By 1933, the Nazis had embraced the work of several prominent American scholars, among them, physical anthropologists Aleš Hrdlička and Charles Davenport and geographers Walter Christaller and Ellsworth Huntington, a founder and early president of the Ecological Society of America.

Following statist economic perspectives and genetic theories that still bore the mark of this history, Hardin, who was an anti-immigrant and an advocate of forced sterilization and held white nationalist sentiments, asserts that individual's self-interest inevitably undermines communal action. Hardin's education by the inter-war generation of scholars (BS zoology 1936, PhD ecology 1941) and his own predilections follow these earlier trends in ecology, economics, and state planning.

Today, there is abundant evidence that, throughout human history and to the present day, communities have found precise and equitable ways to organize their collective and individual tasks without central authority. Ethnographic, archaeological, and documentary evidence points to a wide range of strategies that can benefit individuals, groups, and communities. Such equitable forms of governance go by many names: communitarian, collective, anarchist, and many others. Of particular current interest are communities that successfully manage common property (jointly held) as well as common-pool (open access) resources.

In 2009, anthropologists and archaeologists found Lin Ostrom and her colleagues' work especially welcome: Ostrom's Nobel Prize in Economics shone a light on Hardin's adherence to unsupported claims with carefully documented field-work, much of it drawn from anthropology. They identified 'design principles' of common-pool resource management that include local knowledge, effective communication, clear rules, monitoring, sanctions, paths for conflict resolution, internal trust, and recognition of self-determination by higher-level authorities (Ostrom 1990). These are principles that apply equally to agricultural collectives, anarchist squats, fishing communities, community-owned gardens, and employee-owned corporations.

This volume is a broad and sophisticated update on the commons, employing ethnographic accounts as well as archaeological and historical records. The authors examine how a diverse group of communities integrate communal enterprises and organizations into frameworks that necessarily include ranked, nested, and networked structures (e.g., governance at all levels, associations, individual rights, community norms). The authors of this volume emphasize the specificity of the enterprise, which is always necessary due to the diversity of historical, cultural, legal, and environmental parameters. They argue that risk management is a local, social enterprise, not amenable to imposition from above. Most importantly, their

careful work gives back to our human future a skill that is as old as the human experiment itself and as useful as ever: that of self-organization.

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