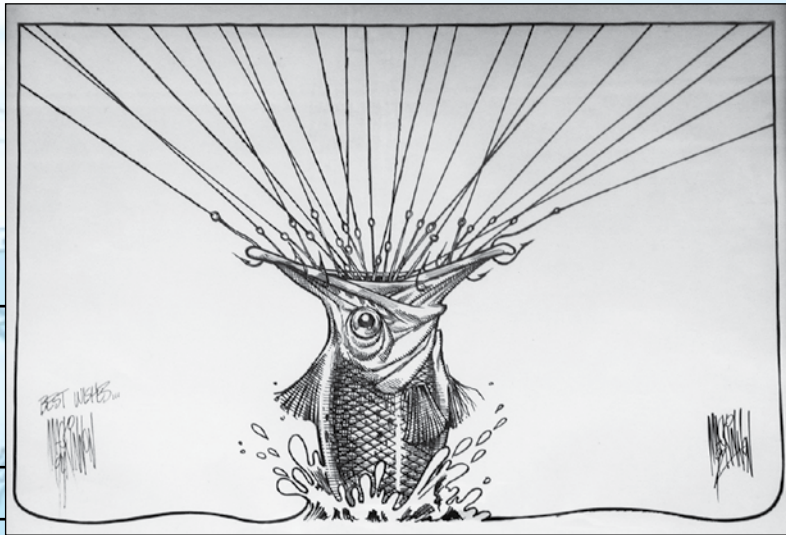


Preventing the Tragedy of the Commons



▲ Cartoonist Bruce MacKinnon's rendering of the tragedy of the commons with his comment on the closure of Nova Scotia fisheries in 1994. Republished with permission from *The Halifax Herald*, Ltd.

The Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis began as an experiment in how to do research. It brought together a variety of scholars interested in issues related to the preservation of resources, natural and human, and proposed that their common issues might have solutions in common. After 35 years and funding from dozens of foundations and government agencies—including the National Science Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development—the “Workshop” has proved its practical value. Faced with issues of global warming and sustainability, the world has discovered that the Workshop has been building tools for dealing with these issues for three decades. Now the Workshop has been replicated in centers on almost every continent, and the tools it has developed have been applied to cultural and environmental issues around the world.

Elementary algebra students, faced with the dreaded “word problem,” learn that if they identify the type of problem, solving it is much easier. If, for instance, they spot a time-rate-distance problem, they immediately know what variables to look for and what formula to plug them into. The Indiana University Workshop on Political Theory and Policy Analysis has entered its fourth decade of research based on problems at the boundaries of political economy and practice. In recent years, their guiding problem type is one that considers what happens when a group of people depend on shared resources. Can the group be sustained? What rules would have to be put into place, what organizations set up, to assure that the resource is not depleted and that those whose lives depend on it can rely on its availability? Their mission is to find commonalities and design principles that will give researchers a leg up on their work by linking it with similar efforts of other scholars and researchers.

▼ From left, Roger Parks, Lin Ostrom, and a student analyze data on police departments at the Workshop in 1977. [Research and Creative Activity]



October 12, 2009. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences has named Elinor Ostrom, one of two recipients of the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics, "for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons."



▲ Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom at WOW4. *All work and no play is not a sustainable solution.*

This type of problem is, of course, massively more complex than what any of us encountered in elementary algebra, and even after 35 years, there is not complete agreement on what the variables should be or what the formulas are that connect them. Still, researchers all over the world have used the “problem of the commons” as a guide to their work. Environmental issues—such as those related to shared forests, grazing land, fisheries—fit well into this approach. Equally compatible with this kind of analysis are the less palpable resources that cultures own in common—the rights granted by a democracy, for instance, or the institutions put into place to support it. These common rights and institutions are vulnerable to the same dangers as environmental resources. Thus, problems related to sustaining democratic institutions can be parsed in ways very similar to those that can help us understand what is necessary to sustain our natural environment.

Soon after Elinor and Vincent Ostrom founded the Workshop in 1973, Lin Ostrom and her students began an analysis of the Indianapolis police department. The dominant institutional thinking of the 1960s said that bigger was better. School districts were consolidated, and so were police departments, in the name of efficiency. Lin Ostrom’s group attempted to measure that efficiency. They found in studies of the Indianapolis and Chicago police depart-

ments that larger meant a better crime laboratory, but larger also meant slower response time to emergencies. When bigger is better, and when it is not, became a central element of the problem of the commons. Although the initial emphasis was national and local, the Workshop dealt with issues that were quickly recognized as “national and local” in every part of the globe.

Every five years, the Workshop convenes what it calls a “Workshop on the Workshop.” The fourth of these, held in June 2009, brought together 144 scholars from 27 countries. Sixteen working groups formed the core of WOW4 meetings; they illustrate the robustness of the Workshop’s idea of commonality. Groups held working sessions on land governance in Kenya and Liberia; irrigation management in Nepal, Thailand, and Pakistan; social services in Trinidad and Tobago; water sharing in rural Africa; forest management in Latin America; national parks in Scandinavia; public administration in China; sustainable mountain culture in the Philippines; and social patterns of urban neighborhoods in the West. The list goes on and on. For WOW4 participants, it was all in a day’s work to identify common elements in these research areas and to seek efficient and practical solutions to matters that touch different continents and disparate parts of our lives.

WOW4 seemed more a family reunion than an international conference. Most if not all participants had spent time in the Workshop in Bloomington—as students, visitors, or research scholars. They all arrived knowing they would find common ground. During a plenary session when several speakers were asked what they found most and least valuable in the Workshop, there was unanimity that most valuable were the familial, nurturing atmosphere, the balance between tolerance and engagement, inclusion and confrontation, and the creation of a community in global variety. The connections among participants went deep; the mere mention of talent shows, the proper way to make



Photo by Harini Nagendra

▲ The government established the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve in the mid-70s. The forest ranger at the right watches helplessly as women harvest thatch from within the reserve. The government can attempt to protect the land, but it can’t fully police the result.



◀ Farmers repairing an earthen irrigation canal in the Dang Valley region of Nepal. Upon discovering that a local farmer had diverted the irrigation canal, the farmers immediately rushed to repair the canal and sanction the offending party.

a shot of espresso, or the eccentricities of the building's facilities needed no explanation; heads nodded instantly in remembrance or agreement. They knew all the standard issues and the in-jokes. If someone mentioned a "Hey!" moment, everyone knew exactly what to expect.

Although she will remain an active researcher, Lin Ostrom will pass the administrative reins to long-term Workshop participants James Walker and Michael McGinnis. The world has in recent years taken up the issues that have been at the heart of the Workshop for decades—ecology and sustainability. "But its work is not done," both Walker and McGinnis say.

The Workshop's interest in the problem of the commons began as a challenge to Garrett Hardin's influential article, "The Tragedy of the Commons," which first appeared in *Science* in 1968. Hardin sees the destruction of resources held in common as inevitable. He admits of only two solutions: privatize the resource or put it under centralized government control. The Workshop identifies other situations where commons have proved sustainable and so contradict Hardin's assertion that there are only two solutions. "This third possibility is not one solution but a pointer to ways to find solutions," McGinnis explains. "There is no panacea. The problem of the commons can be resolved only with the involvement of those who are affected by it. In consequence, a solution that works in one place may not work in another. What remains is trying to figure out conditions under which each option is most likely to succeed, or more realistically, what types of hybrid schemes are most effective in different circumstances, involving different mixtures of partial privatization, some government oversight, and community-based management."

"The Workshop approach links rigorous scientific analysis to policy relevance," says McGinnis. "The connection is unusual. On the one hand, you have hard-nosed scientists; on the other you have those who want to change the world. The first group is impatient with the impulses of advocacy; the

second is impatient with the deliberateness of scientific research. The coming together of these two groups has reached the status of a new academic discipline with its own professional organization and annual conferences."

Walker adds, "The Workshop is no longer 513 North Park Avenue, as it may have been in 1983. It is now a set of linkages—including affiliated workshops in Arizona, in China, in Romania, and possibly soon in Mali. It is more than a dozen working groups with collaborators actively connected across the world. Some of those groups will finish their work soon. Others will never be done. It is hundreds of ongoing interactions of alumni and friends working on similar issues of self governance and sustainability."



▲ Arbol del Tule, Santa Maria del Tule. The Tule cypress tree is Mexico's national tree. It is over 2,000 years old and one of the oldest living trees in the world. With a 10-meter diameter trunk, it is also considered by many to be the broadest tree in the world. The preservation of common forest land is a program that the Workshop has addressed in many places around the world.