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Tragedy of the Commons

When everyone looks out for his or her own interests and no one looks out for the interests of the entire community (the "commons"), all eventually suffer. For example, one family might discharge their sewage into an unpolluted river, using the reasoning that "the little bit of pollution we contribute can't hurt that much." But if everyone in town did the same thing, the general health and well-being of the public downstream would deteriorate.

Another example: The splendid sand dunes at the Cape Cod National Seashore are being destroyed by the ravages of human feet and tire treads. Efforts by the National Park Service to restrict climbers on the dunes led one member of the Provincetown Board of Selectmen to exclaim, "It seems like every year they come up with more ways to deprive people of recreational activities. You can't take your dog out there; you can't pick the flowers. What are the dunes for? You can't admire them if you can't get on them."

Standards and laws are enacted in many situations to prevent nearly harmless individual acts from escalating to public disasters. For example:

- Factories creating air pollution
- Running in the school corridors
- Highway speed limits
- Throwing trash along the highways and in the school lunchroom
- Exhaust emission standards for cars
- Toxic waste dumping
- Aircraft traffic control and highway traffic lights
- Hunting whales
- Fishing out of season in local streams and ponds

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Similar cases for which few or *no* restrictive laws exist:

- Large-scale fishing on the Grand Banks, the North Sea, and other productive ocean waters
- Having one more baby in the family
- Driving one more car into an air-polluted city
- Paving over one more acre of farmland for a housing development
- Cutting trees in the world's remaining tropical forest

(See "Destruction of Tropical Forests," p. 33.)

Would you support laws restricting any of these activities? Which ones?

All goods and practices involving public or group ownership, such as the atmosphere, the oceans, our parks, and our natural environment—the commons—are examples of resources vulnerable to being overspent. In a commons, the gain to each individual user is exclusively a private gain *in the short term*. The resulting environmental degradation is spread out among *all* the users and only shows up *as a community loss in the long term*, when the resource shows severe stress or signs of collapse.

How many examples of over-used, severely stressed community possessions can you identify in your home, in your community, in the U.S., and in the world? (Many are scattered throughout this book.) As one example: Should dune buggies and other off-road vehicles be allowed in the dune or desert areas of national parks and other public lands where they destroy the fragile vegetation—and the silence?

Garrett Hardin has said, "Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all." Do you agree? (See the classic essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," Garrett Harden, *Science*, 1968 (162) 1243-48, and reprinted frequently elsewhere.)

(See "Ocean-Bottom Minerals," p. 66 and "The Geopolitics of Genes," p. 18.)

Think about this . . . When astrology leads people to base serious economic and political decisions on its predictions, it is no longer a game. Isn't it dangerous?