

The Tragedy of the Commons

By Garrett Hardin

Summary: Hardin's article is one of the most important and provocative essays of our generation. It was written in 1968, at the dawn of the environmental movement in the United States. For the first time, the scientific press saw an argument that some problems are beyond science's ability to solve. Hardin suggests a fundamental problem in the self interest of individuals compared to society as a whole. For him, the "commons" represents any commonly held natural resource: food, land, water, air, etc.

The author states that overpopulation belongs to a class of problems for which no technical solution exists. People are constantly trying to find a way to avoid the evils of overpopulation without sacrificing the privileges they currently enjoy.

What Shall We Maximize?

1. Are the world's resources finite or infinite? Give 3 examples to support your answer.
2. The author makes biological arguments about what it would take to maximize population. Explain what this means in terms of lifestyle and consumption of resources. How does he distinguish between "maintenance calories" and "work calories"?
3. Is it possible to for everyone to agree on what is in "the common good"? How should we make decisions that concern natural resources?
4. There is no country on earth with a growth rate of zero. What does the author say about growth rates in richer and poorer countries? What do you think are the implications of this trend?
5. What is Adam Smith's principle of "the invisible hand"? Does the author think that this is a workable system?

Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons

1. Why will the herdsman always choose to add another animal to the herd?
2. Give 3 other examples, from the essay or your own, that illustrate the author's thesis that private choice abuses public resources.
3. Compare the options given for managing Yosemite and other national parks. What would you do?

Pollution

1. Give an example at home, at school, and out in the community about our tendency to "foul our own nest" while expecting someone else to bear the responsibility for cleaning it up.
2. How has overpopulation changed the rules about recycling and use of resources?

How to Legislate Temperance?

1. What is temperance in the context of this article?
2. The author states that because conditions change, we have resorted to large bureaucracies to help administer law, rather than relying on absolutes. Do you think this helps or hurts the situation? Does it help people take responsibility for their actions?

Freedom to Breed is Intolerable

1. How are natural populations self limiting? The article uses birds as an example.
2. The author's central argument concerns the unlimited right to breed in a welfare state. Why is this a problem? What would you propose as a solution?

Conscience is Self-Eliminating

1. The author uses the principles of natural selection to argue that people with consciences will be eliminated over time. Explain.

Mutual Coercion Mutually Agreed Upon

1. The author uses the idea of taxation as a coercive device. It makes certain behaviors more and more expensive to continue. Give 3 examples of how this policy is used to regulate behavior today.
2. Why do we accept taxes even though we don't like them?

Recognition of Necessity

1. When are common areas useful or workable?
2. Give 3 examples of commons that have been restricted or eliminated in our system.
3. "Freedom to Breed Will Bring Ruin to All." Some countries penalize or tax births after a certain number or offer tax relief for people who volunteer to have fewer children. Some people have proposed cutting off welfare benefits to women who have a second child. Others support mandatory sterilization of drug addicts or other groups that are "unfit". What do you think? What steps would you propose to help solve the problem of overpopulation?
4. In the 1990's this author suggested that emergency food aid to areas hit by famine makes the problem worse. He said that sending food would only allow those mothers to have more children the following year, thereby increasing the population pressure. What do you think of this argument?