

An Excerpt From

Our Common Wealth
The Hidden Economy That Makes Everything Else Work

by Jonathan Rowe
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

OUR COMMON WEALTH

THE
HIDDEN
ECONOMY
THAT MAKES
EVERYTHING
ELSE WORK



JONATHAN ROWE

Foreword by

BILL MCKIBBEN

Afterword by

DAVID BOLLIER

Edited by

PETER BARNES

Praise for *Our Common Wealth*

“Jonathan Rowe’s work offers a stunningly original vision that brings new depths of common sense and moral vision to the economic and social crises of our world. Who knew that there could be such a marriage of hope and hard-hitting clarity!”

—**Jacob Needleman, author of *An Unknown World***

“Read this book as though you were opening a treasure chest. It transcends our stale left-right debates and reveals the wealth available to all of us if we just recognize and protect it.”

—**Sarah van Gelder, Executive Editor, *YES! Magazine***

“I’ve met a lot of people in my life but none quite like my friend Jonathan Rowe. He was a unique and original thinker who constantly challenged our prevailing ideas of progress.”

—**Byron Dorgan, former US Senator**

“This brilliant book by a wonderful man we lost too soon illuminates the essential question of our politics going forward: are we all in this together? Jonathan Rowe’s answer is a resounding and convincing yes!”

—**Jonathan Alter, NBC news analyst and author of *The Promise: President Obama, Year One***

“Most journalists leave behind nothing more than ephemeral news clips about forgotten but overhyped crises. Jonathan Rowe bequeathed to us a provocative concept that could unite left and right—the fostering of places and institutions outside the realms of business and government that can protect us from twenty-first-century avarice.”

—**Walter Shapiro, veteran political columnist**

“Jonathan Rowe maps out a vast swath of our economy that few of us have considered and conventional economists have persistently failed to account for—the cooperative realms of family, neighborhoods, and civic society. The relentless colonization of these realms by the market explains much that has gone wrong with modern society.”

—**Paul Glastris, Editor in Chief, *Washington Monthly***

“If there is any way out of the squeeze that afflicts today’s economy, it will partly be through the ideas held in this book. And Rowe delineates them with both a philosopher’s eye and a poet’s touch. Rarely has the potential of the commons been explained so clearly.”

—**Todd Oppenheimer, author of *The Flickering Mind***

“Jonathan Rowe was a modern-day Johnny Appleseed, happily planting practical ideas that others missed or dismissed. In *Our Common Wealth*, he shows how we can share, rather than destroy, the varied bounties of our earth and our own communities.”

—**Russ Baker, Editor, *WhoWhatWhy***

“Jonathan Rowe creates a whole new entry in the tired national debate between state and market: the commons. His thinking is neither liberal nor conservative—the commons must be protected from the state as well as from corporations. This is a beautiful little book.”

—**Mickey Kaus, author of *The End of Equality***

“*Our Common Wealth* is a vitally important book that lights the way to putting economics in the service of human needs.”

—**Gregg Easterbrook, author of *The Leading Indicators***

“*Our Common Wealth* delivers a jolt of common sense. This book is Jonathan Rowe’s legacy as *Small Is Beautiful* is E. F. Schumacher’s.”

—**Jay Walljasper, author of *All That We Share***

“Many modern readers still appreciate Montaigne’s timeless essays. I fully expect citizens of future centuries to discover—and similarly appreciate—Jonathan’s remarkable insights and wisdom, too.”

—**Phil Keisling, Director, Center for Public Service, Portland State University**

“Jon Rowe’s genius lay in understanding the nature of shared wealth and the taking of that wealth. Pure air is wealth we share; air pollution is a taking of that wealth. Contemplative quiet is shared wealth; noise pollution is a taking of it. What makes life worth living is common wealth—public health, community, nature, privacy, access to knowledge, the joys of childhood, thousands of things we hardly notice. There is an economics of common wealth. Common wealth can and must be managed. That is Jon Rowe’s message to us.”

—**George Lakoff, Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Don’t Think of an Elephant***

“No one understands the depth and beauty of the commons better than Jonathan Rowe did, and none have expressed it as clearly. The best of his writing on the subject is in your hands. It will change your take on just about everything.”

—**Mark Dowie, investigative journalist**

“Jonathan Rowe had an enviable gift for stripping complex ideas down to their essence. No idea mattered more to him than preserving the things we all share free of charge against the encroachments of capitalism. This jewel of a book describes how the commons sustains and enriches our lives and what we can do to save it.”

—**Timothy Noah, author of *The Great Divergence***

“Jonathan Rowe has bequeathed a book to us that does nothing less than make the invisible visible. After reading its crystal-clear pages, you will redouble your efforts to protect the things that matter most.”

—**Alan AtKisson, author of *The Sustainability Transformation***

“This profoundly sensible and humane book is the perfect antidote to selfishness, greed, and the mindless pursuit of profit that endangers even the air we breathe.”

—**Charles Peters, Founding Editor, *Washington Monthly***

“In both his writing and his life, Jonathan Rowe was the explorer, cartographer, and defender of the commons. This book illuminates the ways in which the commons provides a framework for all of economics.”

—**Edgar Cahn, founder, TimeBanks USA**

“Jonathan Rowe never shied away from an idea because it was too big, too new, or too unlikely to be taken seriously. He believed the world could be changed for the better if we look beyond clichéd notions.”

—**Sam Smith, Editor, *The Progressive Review***

“Jonathan Rowe was an artist with words, a craftsman who wrote with the kind of care he saw disappearing from our hurried, consumer-centered society. While no book can do full justice to his life and thought, this one gives us a wonderful glimpse into them.”

—**John de Graaf, coauthor of *What's the Economy For, Anyway?* and *Affluenza***

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OUR COMMON WEALTH

ALSO BY JONATHAN ROWE

Time Dollars

(with Edgar Cahn)

OUR COMMON WEALTH

The Hidden Economy That
Makes Everything Else Work



JONATHAN ROWE

Edited by Peter Barnes

Foreword by Bill McKibben

Afterword by David Bollier



BK

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

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Our Common Wealth

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Tel: (415) 288-0260, Fax: (415) 362-2512

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For Josh and Mary Jean



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CONTENTS

Foreword by Bill McKibben xi

Introduction by Peter Barnes 1

THEORY

1 ■ Our Hidden Wealth	13
2 ■ How Tragic Is the Commons?	18
3 ■ A New Commons Story	23
4 ■ A Parallel Economy	27
5 ■ Stop the Invasions!	31
6 ■ The Myopia of Money	34
7 ■ Human Nature and the Commons	37
8 ■ Common Property	44
9 ■ Takers and Givers	48
10 ■ The Community of Goods	51
11 ■ Conservative Commoners, Once	54

PRACTICE

12 ■ Accounting for Common Wealth	61
13 ■ Tollbooths of the Mind	64
14 ■ Subsistence from the Commons	68

Our Common Wealth

15	■	Build It and They Will Sit	75
16	■	Sidewalks of the Information Age	78
17	■	Reallocating Time	82
18	■	Time Banking	86
19	■	Who Owns the Beach?	90
20	■	From Alleys to Commons	94
21	■	New Institutions Needed	97
22	■	Seeds of a Commons Movement	100

Afterword by David Bollier 103

Notes 105

Acknowledgments 109

Index 111

About the Author 121

About the Editor 122

About On The Commons 123

About West Marin Commons 123

Ill fares the land,
to hastening ills a prey,
where wealth accumulates,
and men decay.

OLIVER GOLDSMITH (1770)



A proper community . . . is a commonwealth: a place,
a resource, an economy. It answers the needs, practical
as well as social and spiritual, of its members—
among them the need to need one another.

WENDELL BERRY (1987)



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FOREWORD

by Bill McKibben

In case you think there's anything small or secondary about the idea of the commons, in case you think it a molehill to the mountain of our economy, consider the issue that lies athwart our progress as a civilization: climate change.

One economist after another has described climate change as a "market failure," the greatest of all time, since without a price attached to use of the atmosphere we continue to pollute it with abandon. But the solution to climate change requires us to understand that the atmosphere is a commons. If it belongs to anyone, it belongs to all of us. And if Exxon and other fossil fuel companies want to use it as a dump, they need to compensate us at a rate that leads to the rapid technological and social change on which our future depends.

Our greatest climatologist, James Hansen, the man who first alerted the world to the crisis, has led a relentless

campaign for just this response, terming it “fee-and-dividend.” So it’s not too much to say that our future as a species requires grasping the ideas in this book.

Which is why it’s so good that Jon Rowe was perhaps the clearest writer I can think of. In these chapters he manages to take a concept most people have never really considered and put it in terms that no reasonable reader will reject. This is especially telling because the subset of the population that has heard of the commons has usually heard of it in negative terms.

Garrett Hardin’s famous essay, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” was, as it turned out, both seductively appealing and almost entirely wrong. As Rowe demonstrates, communities around the planet have managed to hold land and many other things in common, and to do so wisely and carefully. It’s only when those commons are invaded by a rampaging market that their protective arrangements break down. We’ve wasted a good many years following Hardin’s libertarian solutions. Now it’s time to get on a workable path.

As we do, it’s worth underlining that there’s nothing automatic about managing a successful commons. It requires us to be in contact, and to think about how we fit into the greater whole. It asks us to be more than mere consumers. And as Rowe points out again and again, we’re completely capable of doing that. This is evident not just in olden-day stories about pastures, but in up-to-the-minute tales of Wikipedia, land trusts, public radio, and farmer’s markets.

In the past year, the Occupy movement has limned the failures of our market economy. Many have complained, however, that Occupy didn't come up with a set of solutions. In fact, the commons in its many guises is the end to which their outrage points (and even, in the self-government of the Occupy encampments, what it began to model).

THE COMMONS DOESN'T CONSTITUTE THE WHOLE answer; there are many things markets do well, as long as they're adequately regulated. But it is the ideas in this book that point the way forward. Jon Rowe, a wise and decent man and a good friend, died much too soon. He's not here to lead the charge, so we need to spread his insights together.

Bill McKibben is an author, climate activist, and Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College. He has written more than a dozen books, including The End of Nature (1989) and Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet (2010). He currently leads the climate campaigning organization 350.org.

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Introduction

As Highway 1 winds north from San Francisco along the Pacific coast, a rusty road sign proclaims, “Point Reyes Station—Population 350.” That’s an understatement these days, but it aptly reflects the way Jonathan Rowe, who lived here for the last decade of his life, thought about the town. Sure, parking is sometimes hard to find on Main Street and the feed barn now includes an espresso bar, but Point Reyes Station is still a very quiet place, nestled amid nature and farms, with friendly merchants, a local newspaper (two, actually), and caring neighbors. Which is how Jonathan Rowe thought the world ought to be.

I met Jonathan long before either of us lived here. We first connected in Washington in the 1970s when I was a reporter for *The New Republic* and he, a recent law school graduate, was among Ralph Nader’s first “Raiders.” We clicked instantly and remained close friends (and eventually neighbors) until his sudden death in 2011.

Jonathan was a brilliant, complex, and somewhat quirky man. Other adjectives that could be applied to him include humble, deeply religious (in the best sense), and loving. He was both a thinker and a doer, with each activity enriching the other. And he was a wonderful, almost poetic, storyteller. He made his graceful paragraphs seem effortless, though of course they never were.

Jonathan grew up in small towns on Cape Cod. The arc of his life flowed through Boston, Washington, New York, and San Francisco, with a detour through Philadelphia, but his small-town roots never left him. After Nader he worked for a mayor of Washington (Marion Barry) and a U. S. Senator (Byron Dorgan of North Dakota). He wrote for the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Monthly*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and many other journals. His achievements are too numerous to list here, but one is worth special note: his slow and difficult ascent from stutterer to radio talk show host.

Intellectually, Jonathan journeyed too. At Harvard in the 1960s he was a Goldwater Republican. Gradually and somewhat reluctantly, he shifted to the left. Yet all his life he retained the temperament of a Burkean conservative, and one of his great disappointments was seeing the conservative movement taken over by billionaires, yahoos, and zealots. His writings covered many subjects. What unified them were lifelong preferences for small over big, local over distant, and nonmonetary over monetary relationships. These were the source of his passion for the commons.

Jonathan was what you might call a *scalist*, someone who thinks scale is really important, possibly more important than anything else, and that there are such things as *enough* and *too much*. Eat one cheeseburger and you feel great, eat two and you're stuffed, eat three and you're sick. The optimal scale for a human community is substantially greater than one, but never greater than the number of people who can sort of know each other, or so Jonathan thought. Similarly, the optimal quantity of many sorts of human activity is far short of infinity, yet we seemingly don't know when or how to slow down.

Jonathan didn't discover, or more precisely, name, the commons until late in his life. In the mid-1990s he moved to San Francisco to work with a now-defunct think tank called Redefining Progress. The group's premise was that what mainstream economists call "progress" is in fact the opposite. Since the 1970s, the think tank argued, economic growth in the United States has led to less happiness, not more. In this spirit, Jonathan lead-authored a much-discussed *Atlantic Monthly* article called "If the GDP Is Up, Why Is America Down?"¹ The group's remedies for this dissonance were better economic indicators (down with GDP!) and taxes on "bads" like pollution instead of "goods" like labor.

Such remedies were not entirely satisfying to Jonathan; they felt more technical than human. What Jonathan wanted was to revivify a whole spectrum of human activity that was small, local, and mostly nonmonetary. He knew such

activity was widespread, but it didn't have a name. After much thought, he stuck an old but appropriate tag on it: "the commons." Once he took this leap, a whole world opened up.

JONATHAN'S FIRST ARTICLE MENTIONING "THE COMMONS" was published in 2001 in *The American Prospect*.² It was not about the commons per se, but about a time banking system invented by his friend Edgar Cahn. (See chapter 18, "Time Banking.") In the system, members of a community provide services for each other at no cost. For each hour members help one another, they get credit recorded in a computer that they can draw on when they need help themselves. In the article Jonathan traced the system's roots to colonial days when settlers built cohesive communities around a common pasture.

Soon Jonathan had constructed a larger narrative that saw the commons as a collection of many shared natural and social assets, including the Earth's ecosystems, the ecologies of small communities, the Internet, and our collective achievements in a myriad of fields. This is a much larger vision of the commons than we are accustomed to. In it, the commons is a vast economic realm, comparable in scale to the market and just as important. "It is a parallel economy that does real work," Jonathan would write later, "a counterpoise to the market that provides antidotes to many pathologies of the modern age." Moreover, this broadly conceived commons is far from being a relic; in fact, it is needed today more than

ever. “At the start of the industrial age, products were scarce and commons abundant. All the gears were arranged to produce more stuff. But times change and scarcities shift. Where once the products of the market were scarce, now it is commons that are scarce and also most needed.”

What unifies this extremely diverse sector are its operating principles. Unlike the market, which is organized to maximize short-term private gain, the commons is (or should be) organized to preserve shared assets for future generations and to spread their benefits more or less equally among the living. If government nurtured this sector as zealously as it nurtures the market, the modern world would be a healthier and happier place.

Along with David Bollier, Harriet Barlow, Julie Ristau, and myself, Jonathan cofounded the Tomales Bay Institute (named for a bay near Point Reyes Station) that later became a network called On The Commons. Together we cranked out reports and articles making the case for the commons piece by piece and as an entirety. In doing this work Jonathan pulled together all of his lifelong thinking. In his mind he’d finally found, if not a panacea, at least an antidote to the numerous failings of the market.

During these years Jonathan settled into small-town life again and started a family. He married Mary Jean Espulgar, a Filipina he met in San Francisco, and they had a son, Josh. Jonathan walked Josh to school every day, coached Little League baseball, helped the local newspapers and radio station, made countless friends, and was probably happier than

at any time in his life. He also became familiar with village life in the Philippines and drew many lessons from that.

As always, he strove to combine practice with theory. With Elizabeth Barnet, he cofounded a group called West Marin Commons, which among other things created a town square, or *zócalo*, out of an empty lot, a community garden of native plants, and a website for sharing free stuff. This was of a piece with his fondness for traditional Main Streets and neighborhoods with places to sit. He also reported on local commons' efforts across America—farmers' markets, land trusts, municipal wi-fi networks, open spaces for pedestrians and bench-sitters, websites for sharing things, and so on. These stories convinced him that a commons movement is stirring, even if the stirrers don't know it yet.

While the focus of Jonathan's writing and engagement was local, he was fully aware of the larger-scale problems humanity faces. He appreciated that while informal, participatory commons work well in small communities and online, they are insufficient to deal with corporate power, environmental degradation, and extreme inequality. Bigger and more structured institutions are needed for those challenges.

To address these systemic problems Jonathan envisioned an assortment of trusts empowered to protect large commons from corporate invasion. Just as corporations are legally bound to protect the interests of their shareholders, so the trusts would be legally obliged to preserve the commons under their charge. To do this effectively, the lawyer

in Jonathan understood, they'd need strong property rights, including the rights to charge rent and pay dividends to owners. "Put commoners in charge of the air, let us charge polluters for using it, and we'll see a lot less pollution than we do now," he wrote.

What particularly excited Jonathan about the commons is its potential to realign American politics. Jonathan himself was what linguist George Lakoff calls a "bi-conceptual"—he harbored conservative as well as liberal tendencies and was able to live with both. Because the commons is distinct from both the state and the market, Jonathan saw it as a way to bridge left and right. This may seem quixotic, but just the other night, as I watched Fox News at an airport, I heard right-wing commentator Bill O'Reilly opine with fervor (after blaming President Obama for high oil prices) that "we the people own the gas and oil discovered in America. It's our land and the government administers it in our name." Like-minded pundit Lou Dobbs then pitched a national version of the Alaska Permanent Fund that would return part of the value of America's oil as dividends to every citizen.³

In the end, what Jonathan wanted was not a world without markets or profit-seeking businesses—that would be absurd—but a world in which markets and commons live in symbiosis. "The goal isn't to replace the market with the commons but to build a durable balance between them."

THE BOOK THAT FOLLOWS WAS WRITTEN IN BITS AND pieces between 1993 and 2011. If Jonathan had lived he would have finished it with more grace than I have. Under the circumstances, I've done what I could. I pored through Jonathan's writings about the commons and tried to extract and blend the best. In doing this I edited ever-so-lightly to avoid repetition, bring up to date, and shape a symphony out of melodies composed years apart.

Like any fine writer, Jonathan would surely have quibbled with some of my edits, but I believe he'd be pleased with the book as a whole. It captures his thoughts, spirit, and style. It puts, as Jonathan did, roughly equal weight on theory and practice. And it makes a rousing case, as only Jonathan could, for defending, revitalizing, sharing, and preserving the wealth that is the ultimate source of our well-being and that rightfully belongs to all of us.

Peter Barnes

Point Reyes Station, California

November 2012

OUR COMMON WEALTH



THEORY

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There is a body of thought surrounding the commons, and there are efforts in the real world to strengthen the commons. The first part of the book focuses on the former, the second on the latter. In short, theory and practice.

Rowe begins by painting a picture of the commons in the twenty-first century. This picture goes well beyond the familiar one from medieval Europe; it is shared wealth writ large. It includes innumerable gifts of nature and society, from the atmosphere to the Internet, science to children's stories, soil to community strength. We inherit these assets jointly and hold them in trust, morally if not legally, for those who come after us. These assets are essential to human and planetary well-being as well as to the functioning of our modern economy. Yet to economists and others, they are stunningly invisible.

Economists fail to see the commons because its contributions are difficult to monetize. They also don't believe that humans can act on impulses other than self-gain. Disregard of the commons was also spurred by biologist Garrett Hardin's essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," which holds that commons are inherently self-destructive. Rowe shows that, to the contrary, commons are quite capable of sustaining themselves when protected from predatory forces. The real tragedy is not that commons self-destruct but that they are devoured by outside profit-seekers.

Rowe offers a new story of the commons not as tragedy but as shared wealth under siege. The story identifies both the value of the wealth and its foes. The value of the commons

lies not only in the services it provides—a stable climate, a sense of belonging, a vast store of knowledge—but also in its ability to temper the market’s mindless profit-maximizing that distorts so much around us. The foes of the commons change over time, but nowadays are mostly privatizing corporations.

To protect the commons against privatizers, Rowe suggests we deploy a toolset not usually associated with the commons: property rights. At the moment, property rights protect private wealth much more than common wealth, but that could change. New common property rights—and common property-owning institutions such as trusts—could defend the commons against incursion and ensure that they are preserved for the long term.

In the last chapter of this part, Rowe notes that traditional conservatives understood that markets need limits, just as the state does. He laments that in recent decades, that kind of conservatism has been displaced by a more cynical kind that believes it is okay to waste our patrimony so long as somebody makes money doing it.

—Ed.

Our Hidden Wealth

My wife grew up in what Western experts, not without condescension, call a “developing” country. The social life of her village revolved largely around a tree. People gathered there in the evening to visit, tell stories, or just pass the time. Some of my wife’s warmest childhood memories are of playing hide-and-seek late into the evening while adults chatted under the tree.

The tree was more than a quaint meeting place; it was an economic asset in the root sense of that word. It produced a bonding of neighbors, an information network, an activity center for kids, and a bridge between generations. Older people could be part of the flow of daily life, and children got to experience something scarce in the United States today—an unstructured and noncompetitive setting in which their parents were close at hand.

In the United States we spend hundreds of billions of dollars on everything from community centers to kiddie videos to try to achieve those results, with great inefficiency

and often much less positive effect. Yet most Western economists would regard the tree as a pathetic state of underdevelopment. They would urge “modernization,” by which they would mean cutting down the tree and making people pay money for what it provided. In their preferred vision, corporate-produced entertainment would displace local culture. Something free and available to all would become commodities sold for a price. The result would be “growth” as economists understand that term.

That’s the story of *the commons*, a generic term (like *the market* and *the state*) that denotes wealth we share. To use this term is to evoke a puzzled pause. You mean the government? The common people? That park in Boston? In fact, the commons includes our entire life support system, both natural and social. The air and oceans, the web of species, wilderness and flowing water—all are parts of the commons. So are language and knowledge, sidewalks and public squares, the stories of childhood, the processes of democracy. Some parts of the commons are gifts of nature, others the product of human endeavor. Some are new, such as the Internet; others are as ancient as soil and calligraphy.

What they have in common is that they all “belong” to all of us, if that is the word. No one has exclusive rights to them. We inherit them jointly and hold them in trust for those who come after us. We are “temporary possessors and life renters,” as Edmund Burke wrote, and we “should not think it amongst [our] rights to commit waste on the inheritance.”¹

Though the commons is everywhere, it is nonetheless little noticed. For economists, it is a kind of inchoate mass that awaits the vivifying hand of the market to attain life. Forests are worthless until they become timber, just as quiet is worthless until it becomes advertising. In this way of seeing things, the enclosure of a commons is always a good thing. Money passes over the commons and says, "Let there be light." The village tree becomes Fox Broadcasting, and trumpets blare in heaven.

So too in politics and the media, where the concept of the commons might as well not exist. There are no news reports on the condition of the commons, no speeches about it in the Senate. Newspapers have many pages of stock market reports but barely a word about wealth that belongs to all of us. Political debate is about the government versus the market. One camp wants to turn everything into something for sale, the other counters with programs of the state. It is a debate between Walmart and welfare, and it leaves no room for anything else.

But of course there is more. The value of the commons is beyond reckoning. Before we can protect it, though, we have to see it, and that is no small task. When we breathe the air or banter with neighbors on the sidewalk, it rarely occurs to us that we are using a commons. A commons has a quality of just being there. People don't need a contract to breathe or an insurance policy to call a neighbor for help. Nor do commons require advertising. The market is always pushing "goods"

and “services” in our faces, which might raise doubts as to whether they are really good or really serve. A commons, by contrast, quietly waits to be used.

OF COURSE, SEEING THE COMMONS IS ONLY A FIRST step; the ultimate challenge is to protect it. The solution is not to create new government agencies or programs. Rather, it is to create rules, boundaries, and property rights to protect common wealth, just as we do for private wealth.

This is a crucial point. Societies create private property and societies sustain it. Take away our legal and institutional supports and private property crumbles.

If private wealth requires such an array of props, it is not surprising that common wealth needs as many or more. Private property has lawyers, lobbyists, and bankers on its side. Common wealth, by contrast, is poorly organized, cash short, and inherently nonaggressive. In other words, it needs help.

What forms should such help take? The government should not run a commons any more than it should run businesses, but it can and should set boundaries. For example, it can restrict suburban sprawl through zoning, reserve more of the public airwaves for noncommercial use, and keep the Internet from being taken over by large corporations. Steps like these would not mean more government intrusion into economic, environmental, and social space. Rather, they would make it

possible for something besides corporations to occupy these spaces.

Regarding the natural environment, the case is especially strong. The oceans and atmosphere do not belong to government or private corporations. They belong to all of us, and we need institutions that reflect this. One can imagine, for example, trusts that receive polluters' payments and distribute them to all of us as owners. Such institutions would reflect the fact that there are common rights to clean air and water, just as there are private rights to the factories that pollute them. Put commoners in charge of the air, let us charge polluters for using it, and we'll see a lot less pollution than we do now.

How Tragic Is the Commons?

In the belief system called economics, it is an article of faith that commons are inherently tragic. Almost by definition, they are tragic because they are prone to overuse. What belongs to all belongs to none, and only private or state ownership can rescue a commons from the sad fate that will otherwise befall it.

The standard reference for this belief is an article that appeared in *Science* in 1968 called “The Tragedy of the Commons.”¹ Though the author, Garrett Hardin, was a biologist, his article was strangely lacking in scientific inquiry. It was more like economics—an extrapolation from assumptions rather than an investigation of reality.

Hardin assumed that all commons are free-for-alls. He bid his readers to “picture” a hypothetical pasture peopled with hypothetical herders. These herders existed outside of any social structure and lacked even a capacity to talk with one another. They all behaved according to what the economics texts call “rationality”: they let their herds loose in the pasture

in a single-minded effort to maximize their own gain, with no thought for the future or for anybody else. Under those assumptions, tragedy is a foregone conclusion.

What Hardin overlooked is that people do not necessarily behave as economists assume they do. As historian E. P. Thompson observed, Hardin failed to grasp “that commoners themselves were not without common sense.”² Thompson was referring specifically to the common-field agriculture of his own England. Households had their own plots but shared land for hunting, foraging, and grazing. They pooled their implements and labor for joint maintenance and combined their herds to fertilize their respective plots. The destruction Hardin declared to be inevitable simply did not happen. To the contrary, the system worked well for hundreds of years.

The literature is full of similar examples of long-lasting commons. Spain has had shared irrigation systems, called *huerta*, for 600 years. The farmers whose lands adjoin each canal elect their own chief executive, called a *syndic*. They get water from the canal on a rotating basis; during droughts, the crops with the greatest need get first priority. Similarly, in the alpine regions of Switzerland, grazing pastures typically are commons, as are forests, irrigation systems, and the paths and roadways connecting private and common property.

In these places and elsewhere, the commons and the private exist in symbiosis, like the common areas of an apartment co-op or condominium. Each form of property serves the purpose for which it is suited best. Even in the American

plains, early cattle ranchers found ways to cooperate rather than destroy the habitat that sustained their herds. They adopted the Mexican practice of branding to distinguish different herds. They cooperated on roundups and cattle drives. And they limited their herds and worked to keep out newcomers. It wasn't always pretty, but it also wasn't the calamity Hardin assumed is unavoidable in open pasture.

Hardin's essay won applause in environmental quarters mainly because it was not really about the commons. It was a case for population control, and the tragedy thesis served as a grim parable to that end. From the start, however, anthropologists and others who actually studied commons objected to Hardin's fabricated thesis; indeed, Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel Prize in economics for explaining the longevity of commons.³ Eventually, Hardin modified his stance. He acknowledged that overuse is not due to common ownership per se, but to the absence of rules governing access and use.

Overused commons do exist, of course. Fisheries are an example; the atmosphere is another. When overuse occurs, there generally has been a breakdown in the social structures that once governed use, or the scale of breakdown of such structures is difficult to establish.

THE REAL TRAGEDY SURROUNDING THE COMMONS HAS been the invasion by corporate, governmental, and other external forces. Native Americans did not eradicate the

buffalo on the western plains; white hunters and soldiers did. Local Appalachians did not slice the tops off mountains; outside corporations did. It is therefore strange that the reigning ideology focuses on the self-destruction of commons when the scale of outside devastation is so much greater.

One reason for the tragedy myth's tenacity may be its implicit remedy: privatization. Privatizing commons usually means corporatizing them. This has its advocates. Unfortunately, when it comes to exploiting the commons, corporations have no built-in capacity to say "enough." They are slaves to quarterly earnings statements and the demands of shareholders, all of which push toward liquidating nature and other commons, not sustaining them.

A paradigmatic example is Pacific Lumber, a California company that in the 1980s owned most of the old-growth redwoods still in private hands. Pacific Lumber was unusual. Its chief executive was a lifelong timberman named A. S. Murphy who believed in harvesting no more than the forests could replace. "Their approach," wrote David Harris in *The Last Stand*, "was to treat the forest as capital and try to live off the interest."⁴

This virtue did not go unpunished. Pacific's self-discipline meant its forests were ripe for less conscientious plucking. Its clean balance sheet—Murphy believed in pay-as-you-go—left plenty of room for a raider to load up the company with debt. And this is exactly what happened.

During the leveraged buyout boom of the 1980s, a corporate chief by the name of Charles Hurwitz teamed up with Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky, two of the more infamous financiers of the era, to take over Pacific Lumber. They mortgaged the company to the hilt to finance the purchase. Then, in order to pay off the debt, Hurwitz began liquidating the forests Murphy had conserved. Finance trumped husbandry, as nowadays it usually does. The result was a tragedy *to*, but not caused *by*, the commons.

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