

Tragedy of the Commons

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The tragedy of the commons is a metaphor used to illustrate the conflict between individual interests and the common good. The term was coined and popularized by Garrett Hardin in his 1968 *Science* article "The Tragedy of the Commons."

Hardin used a hypothetical example of English Commons, shared plots of grassland used in the past by all livestock farmers in a village. Each farmer keeps adding more livestock to graze on the Commons, because it costs him nothing to do so. In a few years, the soil is depleted by overgrazing, the Commons becomes unusable, and the village perishes. Hardin actually misunderstood how commons were managed in England and elsewhere, but this may not affect the greater significance of his argument, which pertains primarily to truly open access commons such as the sea and the atmosphere.

The cause of any tragedy of the commons is that when individuals use a public good, they do not bear the entire cost of their actions. If each seeks to maximize individual utility, he ignores the costs borne by others. This is an example of an externality. The best (non-cooperative) short-term strategy for an individual is to try to exploit more than his share of public resources. Assuming a majority of individuals follow this strategy, the theory goes, the public resource gets overexploited.

The tragedy of the commons is a source of intense controversy, precisely because it is unclear whether individuals will or will not always follow the overexploitation strategy in any given situation, and especially because Hardin had a very poor understanding of how traditional commons were managed. Experiments have indicated that individuals do tend to behave in this way, when the common is unregulated, but historically, most commons have been regulated by communities, and the more use-pressure a common is under, the more heavily regulated its use would be. Hardin's misunderstanding of the traditions of common land and resource management, however, has been widely influential and has caused a great deal of trouble for those who wish to advocate regulated communal land use, as opposed to enclosure and privatization (which has historically been associated with the alienation of resources from poorer people).