

International Journal of the Commons
Vol. 4, no 1 February 2010, pp. 213–225
Publisher: Igitur, Utrecht Publishing & Archiving Services for IASC
URL: <http://www.thecommonsjournal.org>
URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-100209
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ISSN: 1875-0281

Expanding the Boundaries of Commons Scholarship: The 2008 Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons

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Acknowledgements: We were privileged to have the roles of editors of this special issue, working with outstanding scholars and the editors and editorial staff of the IJC. We were also supported by our respective institutions, Rutgers University and its Department of Human Ecology, and the Innovative Fisheries Management group at Aalborg University. We are particularly thankful to the many anonymous peer reviewers whose assessments and advice shaped the individual papers and the entire issue. Peer reviewing is a prime expression of the reasoned altruism that keeps a commons alive.

A day or so before the 2008 international meeting of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) began at the University of Gloucestershire, we hired a car and drove on narrow winding roads in search of “Cleeve Common”, a large limestone grassland northeast of the town of Cheltenham, high on a hill overlooking the enclosed fields and towns of this lush part of the Cotswolds. After a couple of wrong turns and stops to take pictures, we made it, our first visit to a classic agrarian common-land, English style. We saw the list of rules and regulations – “the commons” are indeed regulated! – opened the gate – yes, they are fenced –, and were amazed to watch para-gliders playing the winds among the cattle grazing on this hilltop common, a reminder of the importance of common-lands for multiple uses and also their adaptability to changing tastes and values! It was also an eye-opener to learn that in England such common-lands are not public lands, but rather are privately held lands – this one by the descendants of the Lords of the Manor of Southam and Bishops Cleeve – to which neighboring people, usually farmers, hold common use-rights. That fact reflected the broader message of the many papers given at the Cheltenham meeting of IASC: a reminder of the variety and historical/cultural specificity of “the commons”. The web-site for the Conservators of Cleeve Commons (yes, there are people organized to take care of it) describes the landscape as a “natural limestone grasslands”, but the deeper history of the place includes its having been cleared about 10,000 years ago – a reminder of how much what we see and cherish as “natural” can just as well be seen and cherished as created through interactions with people.

I. IASC in Cheltenham

The landscapes, seascapes, and institutions of “the commons” are products of the interactions between humans and their environments, and the IASC conference of 2008 was an opportunity to explore their many dimensions, from the local to the global. This issue of the *International Journal of the Commons* commemorates that conference, which was the 2008 international meeting of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), held in Cheltenham, England July 14–18, 2008, in the heart of the traditional agrarian “commons”. John Powell and Chris Short of the University of Gloucestershire organized the meeting and offer reflections on that experience in this issue after this introduction. The conference was held under the aegis of the IASC and was supported by the University of Gloucestershire, the Ford Foundation, the Center for International Forestry Research, the Christensen Fund, and the International Development Research Centre. As with many “commons”, the resources in this one were multiple and diverse, centered on the theme “Governing shared resources: connecting local experience to global challenges”. Most of the papers are available at the Digital Library of the Commons (<http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu>). In addition, seven of the papers evolved as articles for this special issue of the IJC.

Pre-conference workshops were popular; they included an overview of the UK’s historic and contemporary commons. The organizers also offered numerous

fieldtrips, including to the Forest of Dean, the Gower Peninsula of South Wales, the Inland fisheries of the Severn Estuary, the Shropshire Hills, New Forest National Park, the Somerset Level and some Gloucestershire parishes, all to sample the manifold dimensions and hard-won vitality of common lands and common efforts in the region.

The plenary speakers were outstanding: Bakary Kante, Director of the Division of Environmental Conventions (DEC) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); The Right Reverend Lord Carey of Clifton, former Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of the University of Gloucestershire; Professor Kenneth R. Olwig of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences; and Judy Lin Wong of the Black Environment Network of the UK. The conference banquet, held in Cheltenham's Hall, featured talks by IASC president Ruth Meinzen-Dick and former IASC president Elinor Ostrom (Figure 1). There were numerous other attractions, including a Punch and Judy Show, the Gloucestershire Morris Men (Figures 2 and 3), and a Scottish ceilidh ("barn dance").

But of course the centerpiece of the conference was the collective effort represented by the large number of papers presented. Awards for the "best presentations" went to Lamin Jammeh, Department of Forestry, Gambia, and Doris Marinez-Melgar, Environmental Studies Centre, Guatemala, for standard panel sessions, and to Hemant Gupta, Forest Survey of India, and Dhrupad Choudhury, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal, for presentations at the 'aqua vitae' session. Awards for the "best papers" went to Helen Markelova and Brent Swallow, of the International



Figure 1: IASC Business Meeting: Erling Berge with Elinor Ostrom, July 14, 2008. Photo: Bonnie J. McCay.



*Figure 2: Gloucestershire Morris Men, Univ. of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, July 14, 2008.
Photo: Bonnie J. McCay.*



Figure 3: The Gloucestershire Morris Men, dancing with Michelle Curtain, retired Executive Director of IASC. Photo: Bonnie J. McCay, Cheltenham, July 14, 2008.

Food Policy Research Institute and the World Agroforestry Centre, for the paper that did the most to improve understanding of linkages between local and global commons; to Joseph Bahati, Abwoli Banana, and William Gombya-Ssembajjwe of Makerere University, Uganda, for the paper that provided the best case study analysis, and finally – featured in this special issue – to Justyna Hofmokl, of the Polish Academy of Sciences, for the paper that did the most to improve understanding of governance issues. Before introducing that paper and others collected for this issue, we turn to the conference organizers for their reflections.

Reflections on the 12th Biennial Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons

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The gathering of papers, such as these is an excellent way of reflecting on the conference, which was amazingly about 18 months ago (July 2008). However, they are a snapshot and all of those who attended will have their own memories, most of which we hope are positive ones. The fact that the evaluations rated the academic content as being on average ‘very good’ to ‘excellent’ certainly seemed to suggest that this was the case, and one of the ‘prize winning’ papers is represented here. From our point of view, reflecting on the conference itself is quite painful as it was exhausting and traumatic at times but mostly exhilarating and hugely rewarding. We are finally getting over the ‘post-conference traumatic stress disorder’ that anyone who has been associated with a large conference will recognise. We are no longer staring vacantly at our computer screens and as the problems recede we are left the good memories of success. The most rewarding aspect was hitting our target of securing the attendance of over 520 delegates from 71 different countries with every continent presented. Our university has not seen anything like it before or since and in fact the reception, kitchen and cleaning staff still mention it to us now – with a sense of pride and satisfactions as well as relief.



We were thrilled with the range of subjects presented, from both ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ commons but fitting over 400 papers into a limited number of thematic sessions proved challenging. Hence, the introduction of the ‘aqua vitae’ sessions – for three reasons: first to enable us fit more papers into a limited space, second to allow more time for discussion, and third to provide a refreshing after-lunch alternative to the standard parallel session. The idea was to encourage presenters to distil the ‘essence’ of their work into a few minutes and allow participants more time to engage in discussion of the key points. We were more than a little worried to put such a strict time limit on those who had travelled thousands of miles to present their work, but the majority of the evaluations suggest these sessions were popular, with both presenters and participants.

Our greatest disappointment was the very small number of papers exploring global commons issues. Given that the sub-title of the conference was ‘connecting local experience to global challenges’ and the current high level of interest in global environmental problems, it was surprising to see so few papers analysing any aspect of global commons issues. The IASC might want to reflect on this aspect but it has left us wondering whether it was a case of failing to attract those working on global problems, or whether we, as a research community, have we not yet grasped the nettle and applied our knowledge to these much larger and potentially more intractable problems. Are we still too bogged down in our own local issues, our own little areas of familiarity and comfort, and are failing

to make connections. Or is it a larger problem, do we not have the theoretical maturity to analyse global problems from a commons perspective?

These are some of the questions that have nagged away at us since the end of the conference and bring to mind the words of the English poet John Clare who at the height of the enclosure movement in the early 19th century could write:

*“Enclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour’s rights and left the poor a slave;
“Fence now meets fence in owners’ little bounds
Of field and meadow, large as garden grounds,
In little parcels little minds to please
With men and flocks imprisoned, ill at ease.”*

Commons are still being enclosed, and communities enslaved, in an economic sense if not in other ways; even ‘new’ commons that have the potential to create freedom from poverty, from ignorance, from disease, and from environmental catastrophe are being enclosed. Enclosure is insidious, applying not only to material resources but also to knowledge. Knowledge is being enclosed not just through the desire for power and for economic security, but also through more prosaic barriers, such as access, through disciplines, and through professional boundaries, which limit the flow of knowledge in multiple directions. Bakary Kante from UNEP, one of the conference key speakers, identified knowledge (as distinct from ‘information’) as the key to improved governance. He challenged conference participants to find new ways to transfer their knowledge, to take a stronger role in exploring the governance structures and mechanisms of global problems, and to widen the scope of their studies to explore the value of commons resources, to analyse the institutional structures found in international trade, and to examine the limitations of current environmental law.

The conference has certainly had considerable impact on the study of commons in the UK and within Europe. Following a regional meeting in Cheltenham two bids are being prepared to continue the study of commons and to raise the profile. It should be noted at this point that the well-deserved award of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Elinor Ostrom, together with Oscar Williamson, has further helped this cause as she received considerable coverage for this accolade. A further regional meeting is planned in Sheffield in September 2010 on ‘The End of Tradition? Aspects of commons and cultural severance in the landscape’.

The conference started with the notion that new opportunities for dealing with commons problems will appear if we can break down some of the walls that separate practitioners, policy makers and academics, and even those that separate academics through disciplinary boundaries. The evidence suggests that we managed to achieve a small step in that direction; for example, within those who make their living from commons in the UK there is now a sense that they are not alone. One of our strongest memories of the conference was during the pre-

conference workshop on the UK's historic and contemporary commons when a hill farmer from Cumbria in the North of England had a detailed conversation with an academic from Peru about the similarities of grazing behaviour between sheep and alpacas. For him it changed his way of thinking, and he wrote in his local association newsletter about the increased 'sense of identity' that he felt alongside the other delegates from around the globe. The CCRI has also gone on to secure work in areas akin to contemporary commons looking at projects attempting to facilitate biodiversity as it adapts to changes caused by climate change, on the social impacts of changes to fishing communities and in other areas that touch on the social impacts of climate change. Long may this continue!

So the conference had a profound impact not only on some of the UK academics who attended, one said it was the most simulating conference he had attended in 35 years, but also on those who live and work on the UK's contemporary commons. And for those reasons in particular it was worth all the effort and hard work.

2. Expanding the Boundaries of Commons Scholarship

This issue of the International Journal of the Commons touches upon many of the foci of the 2008 IASC conference, from the local to the global, from traditional agrarian commons to the Internet, from forests to fisheries, from the tropics to the sub-arctic. The articles that emerged in our effort to sample the best from the conference constitute a sample of recent and new emphases in commons scholarship that we have organized as follows: (1) Knowledge, Information, and the Commons; (2) Participatory Deliberation, Democracy, and the Commons; (3) Neo-liberal Reform and the Commons; (4) Disrupted Norms and Subjectivities in Reclaiming the Commons; (5) Freedom, Entitlements, and the Commons, and (6) Enclosure, Resilience, and Coupled Systems.

3. Knowledge, information, and the commons

Justyna Hofmokl's prize-winning paper represents the growing interest in applying the model of the commons to matters far removed from the traditional agrarian locale of the discourse, in this case the Internet. In this far-ranging essay, Hofmokl actually questions the easy labeling of the internet as a commons, arguing that doing so requires decomposing the institution into its components, which she defines in terms of physical, logical, and content layers, each of which has different attributes as "goods" and thereby challenges efforts to determine whether or not they meet criteria for "common pool resources". She also addresses a large and eclectic set of concepts and theories that appear appropriate to understanding the Internet. She explores the roles of path dependency and informal and formal rules in shaping the evolution of the institutions constituting the Internet. The eclectic nature of the tools Hofmokl brings to the endeavour of deconstructing and analyzing the internet commons reflects how diverse and multi-disciplinary research on the commons has been.

Effective management of a common pool resource must be based on a reasonably good assessment of the state and dynamics of the resource itself, an often overlooked or simply taken-for-granted aspect of commons management. The commons literature has given more attention to whether or not and how people come together to develop and implement rules for use and care of common property resources than to the sources of knowledge for that purpose, but this imbalance has been addressed by research on “traditional”, “local”, and/or “experience-based” ecological knowledge. Teresa Johnson takes this a step further in her contribution to this special issue by focusing on the interplay between those forms of knowledge and scientific, research-based expertise.

Johnson’s study, based on ethnographic research conducted in the northeastern US, examines the flow of knowledge and expertise between fishers and scientists. Her research is informed by and contributes to theorizing about boundary work in knowledge production and use from the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies. Boundaries between the knowledge of scientists – that is, expert knowledge producers – and fishers are socially constructed and institutionalized, but in cases, such as fisheries, where knowing about the common resource is difficult due to the opacity and fluidity of the environment, being able to cross those boundaries can be extremely important to the shared goal of managing the commons. In the northeastern US cooperative research has emerged as a practice and institution for boundary crossing, and distinctive roles of some people as “boundary spanners” emerge, but this takes place within a larger framework that requires boundary maintenance to ensure the legitimacy of the results.

4. Participatory deliberation, democracy, and the commons

Deliberation in participatory decision-making about a commons, another theme of this issue, relies in part on the availability of reliable knowledge and mutual understanding of resource conditions, as Anna Zachrisson shows in her contribution. Her research falls within the framework of co-management research. Co-management is a topic that follows very directly from the critical perspectives on the “tragedy of the commons” model. Once scholars and practitioners came to realize the benefits gained from relaxing and challenging assumptions of that model, attention was focused on community-based or user-based management of common pool resources. However, especially where the state retains jurisdiction, where the lands or waters are public, co-management appears as the likely form that such efforts by members of a commons community take.

Zachrisson contributes to the understanding of co-management by applying political theory concerning deliberative democracy to a case of conflict resolution and co-management in a mountainous area of western Sweden. This is an intriguing case of expanded rather than restricted public rights: in 1975 snowmobilers gained legal access to nearly all snow-covered lands, the snow both literally and legally erasing private land-owners’ boundaries – in essence creating a new

commons, and, indeed, an open access one. Recreational snowmobiling created costs and problems for land-owners, foresters, reindeer herders, and skiers, but over time the groups involved, including municipal government, created a co-managed snowmobile regulation area, a co-managed regulated commons.

Deliberative democratic theory has evolved as a claim for the value of public participation in matters where values are likely to conflict and the state of things is uncertain and risky, but it is rarely tested, and so it too deserves greater analysis. Zachrisson gives us both in her interview-based case study. Her theoretical section shows that the co-management literature tends to omit certain criteria of deliberative democracy, such as that encounters are structured to facilitate reasoned analysis, giving attention to expert opinions, and she uses her case study to show how important this and other criteria are. She also raises problems, such as “the tyranny of the organized” that may be associated with co-management in so far as larger public interests may not be served. Her case study is modest in scale but the theoretical and practical implications of it are not. Zachrisson’s framework of analysis should be very instructive to others studying participatory elements of commons management.

5. Neo-liberal reform and the commons

Neo-liberal public policies have had profound influences on the commons, particularly through direct and indirect efforts to encourage privatization of land and other resources and to open up local systems to national and international markets. One of our selections on this important issue focuses on a classic case: that of neo-liberal reform and the *ejido* system of land tenure in Mexico. James Barsimantov, Alex Racelis, Grenville Barnes, and Maria DiGiano raise and address a key question: why some ejidos responded to 1992 changes in Mexico’s land law that were intended to favour privatization while others did not. They use the method of controlled case-study comparison to make causal inferences about varied responses to the 1992 reform in six ejidos in the Maya region of Quintana Roo, southern Mexico. They identify external and internal drivers of and sources of resistance to individualization.

Barsimantov and his co-authors take care to delineate the likely mechanisms whereby drivers, such as community forestry programmes, tourism, urban migration, and so forth link to decisions about parcelizing and selling ejido lands. For example, they conclude that tourism, in these cases, worked mainly through its effect on land values, especially for waterfront land, but its effect depended on internal politics as well as specific external pressures. The ability to delineate such mechanisms reflects the value of a research strategy based on a combination of theory (inductive and deductive), some quantitative research (for example data on percentages of land devoted to forest or on sales prices of land) plus focused and well-designed qualitative research. Having a larger “n” might yield more robust correlations, but relying on qualitative research, within a broad theoretical framework, may yield more persuasive accounts of causality.

Like other papers in this issue, Barsimantov et al. contribute to the cumulative body of knowledge on the commons. For example, their study confirms certain basic theories applicable to property and the environment, namely the economists' thesis that scarcity can lead to privatization, and the more nuanced social science argument that communal property may have efficiencies and other advantages under some land use conditions and internal conditions. The study of land reform in Quintana Roo also is important in the attention given to history and culture, and for the latter, to shifting meanings of property. They note the shift towards the notion of private ownership as providing more security for making land-use decisions, even within the framework of resistance to this, as the ethos and values of communal property retain hold.

6. Disrupted norms and subjectivities in reclaiming the commons

A focus on norms, ideas, and discourses is a welcome addition to a commons research programme that has heretofore focused more on rule-based institutions and economic subjectivities. This shift in focus is suggested in the above-mentioned article by Barsimantov et al., where they suggest that the 1992 Land Reform Law in Mexico was less the actual means for parcelization and alienation than a model for doing so that, when combined with certain external and internal conditions, could be used by ejidatarios to accomplish their various goals. Fiona MacKenzie is even more explicit about the value of focusing on changing discourses and subjectivities.

Even though neo-liberal policies and practices prevail in much of today's world, there are openings and possibilities for alternatives. The very ideas of "the commons" and "communal ownership" constitute counter narratives to neo-liberalism. MacKenzie's article focuses directly on this within the theoretical framework of scholars, such as Foucault, Butler, and Gibson-Graham that is emerging in political ecology and geography. In her study of practices and discourses of property and nature in the Outer Hebrides MacKenzie shows that Scotland is on the cusp of global movements toward reclaiming the commons. In the Outer Hebrides, this is taking place as more and more community trusts and community-owned estates, playing on the complexities of a 'crofting' history, come into being. Centuries of feudal and private ownership are being reversed.

Cultural change, in terms of changing subjectivities and ethics, is underway albeit with uncertain futures. The general theory is that particular efforts at land reform serve to "disrupt" norms about property, particularly the norms of privatization and enclosure which lie at the heart of the neoliberal agenda. Such disruptions or interruptions create opportunities or entry points for changes in the ways people think and act, opening up the meanings of land and other resources to new possibilities. As land is brought into community ownership, the stories people tell about it are part of the creation of a new and collective subjectivity with at least some potential or political space for more socially just and ecologically

sustainable futures. Thus, even an initiative to tap the wind and invest in an energy commons – commodifying the wind’s energy – is disrupted by the idea that this should be on behalf of a community, rather than a corporation or wealthy individual, and community-owned wind farms have become a realistic option.

7. Freedom, entitlements, and the commons

Svein Jentoft, Paul Onyango and Mohammad Mahmudul Islam revive early debates on the issues of poverty and freedom. Recall that Garret Hardin, in his formulation of the “tragedy of the [open access] commons”, was influenced by William Forster Lloyd’s early 19th century debates with Thomas Malthus about the causes of poverty. To wit, poverty and misery were not simply outcomes of overpopulation. They are rather due to an institutional failure represented by freedom – both freedom to have children and freedom to enter the labour force. In another way of thinking, the institutional problem is the lack of close linkage between decisions about having children and the fates of those children in the labour force, just as decisions about adding a calf to the pasture were shaped by the short-term benefits of doing so, as against the longer term, and shared, costs.

Jentoft, Onyango, and Islam argue for another perspective on freedom and poverty, based on Amartya Sen’s notion of “freedom as agency” as well as recent work on governance that emphasizes creating opportunities not just problem-solving. The problem of small-scale fishers and other poor, resource-dependent people in the world is not necessarily too much freedom to exploit common pool resources (the open access argument about overexploitation) but the lack of sufficient opportunities and entitlements to make reasonable decisions in light of their own needs and the state of natural resources. If one does not have the wherewithal to learn about and exploit alternatives to a heavily-stressed or declining fishery, or other common pool resource activity, then there is little motivation or capacity to become engaged in efforts to manage it. Governance reform that focuses solely on regulating extractions from the common pool resource, like fish quotas, is unlikely to work without governance reforms that affect education, health care, sanitation, alternative jobs, and the like. Once said – and explicated by the authors – this message seems simple and obvious, but case studies of fisheries in Bangladesh and Tanzania, organized around what Sen argues to be constitutive elements of freedom, suggest the depth and resilience of the problem.

8. Enclosure, resilience, and coupled systems

Enclosure and privatization are central to the story of “the commons”. The article by Grant Murray, Teresa Johnson, Bonnie McCay, Mike Danko, Kevin St. Martin and Satsuki Takahashi addresses one form of enclosure that surely has many precedents and analogs: the cumulative effect of many discrete measures for regulating uses of the commons. The notion of “cumulative effects” has

meaning in the US environmental law with regard to the consequences of multiple anthropogenic events and processes for natural and physical environments. The authors turn it around to examine the outcomes of multiple events and processes, including changes in fisheries regulations, for fishers, fishing businesses, and fishery-dependent communities in the state of New Jersey. One of the patterns of cumulative effect they identify is a “creeping” process of progressive enclosure, as one after another species-specific regulation restricts activity and entry with the net effect, over time, of reduced flexibility and adaptability as well as increased economic and personal burdens and costs. In their conclusion, they bring the analysis into the realm of resilience and coupled system thinking, discussing how enclosure in this case may have significant consequences for the workings of the “coupled” socio-ecological fishery system, including effects on the flow and quality of information as well as the capacity to adapt to environmental change.

9. Conclusion

In their introduction to the first issue of the *International Journal of the Commons*, van Laerhoven and Ostrom (2007) pointed to traditions and trends in the study of the commons. They documented the rise of scholarly publications on the commons, the many disciplines engaged in the project, the diversity of sectors covered in this body of work, and the then highly dispersed siting of articles in journals. They noted methodological improvements, such as the improved balance between in-depth case studies and large-n studies. They reflected on the emergence of a more coherent, cumulative theoretical framework or research agenda, which is expressed in several ways in this collection, and they called for greater attention to issues, such as complexity and uncertainty. The current selection of articles reflects these trends. The articles also enlarge the boundaries of the commons project, having identified the importance and contributed to the understanding of (1) knowledge production and information management for the commons; (2) the workings of participatory deliberation in co-managed commons; (3) the mechanisms whereby neo-liberal reforms do and do not result in further privatization or enclosure of the commons; (4) the political ecology and discourse analysis of reclaiming the commons; (5) the role of unequal entitlements in generating tragedies of both the commons and the commoners; and (6) how enclosure of the commons can take place through cumulative, small events, with considerations of the effects on resilience in coupled systems.

Reference

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