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Book Review

Takeshi Murota and Ken Takeshita, eds. 2013. *Local Commons and Democratic Environmental Governance*. New York: United Nations University Press.

Review by Alison Clarke, Emeritus Professor at the School of Law, University of Surrey, UK.

This book provides a showcase of the breadth and sophistication of modern scholarship on the commons, and a mine of information and detailed analysis on commons dilemmas as they are now being played out in developed and developing countries throughout the world. It is one of five volumes published by the United Nations University Press arising out of a 4 years research project on “Multilevel Environmental Government for Sustainable Development” funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Grant-Aid for Publication of Scientific Research Results, carried out between 2006 and 2012. We perhaps need to remind ourselves that until relatively recently the commons would not have figured very prominently on such a research agenda. Here, however, it provides a central theme of the project in general, and of this volume in particular.

In this volume the editors have collected 19 research papers by Japanese scholars from a variety of disciplines, with the aim of demonstrating that “the sustenance and strengthening of local commons and democratic forms of environmental governance together hold the key to the achievement of equitable resource utilization in parallel with environmental conservation” (Muroto and Takeshita in the *Foreword* at pp. xxi–xxii). Most of the papers are theoretical analyses built around case studies of commons (of a variety of descriptions) in Japan. These make for absorbing and illuminating reading, not least by providing non-Japanese speaking readers with access to the vast wealth of Japanese-language commons scholarship, and detailed information and analysis of the legal structure of traditional, transitional and emerging commons in Japan. However, the value of the book goes wider than this. There are other papers by Japanese scholars analysing problems and possibilities of commons governance in the contexts of inland freshwater fisheries in China’s Taihu Lake Basin (Izuru Ota, Chapter 6), environmental networks in Kuraburi Estuary, Thailand (Shimpei Iwasaki,

Chapter 7), the Norwegian *allemandsrett* right of access, the *Friluftsliv*, and the range of open and closed access commons in Norway (Shimada and Murotta, Chapter 10) and the dynamics of the relationships between local communities and wildlife conservation institutions in the Maasailand of Kenya (Meguro, Chapter 12). There are also valuable overviews. So, for example, in Chapter 1 Yutaka Sugo provides a careful and historically informed analysis of the very different institutions and phenomena to which the 'commons' label has become attached, raising questions about the coherence and value of a broad overarching concept of the commons which accommodates both commons as a means of open access, for example in the notion of the global knowledge commons, and local self-regulating exclusionary commons, for example providing government of local resources by and for local resource users. He demonstrates the pitfalls of putting the two under the same conceptual umbrella, illustrated by, for example, the tensions between local and global interests in cultural heritage.

However, the most valuable feature of the book is the light it throws on one of the most important themes in current commons scholarship: the place of the unitary local common pool resource institution within the broader institutional structures required to manage large scale complex ecosystems and/or multi-layered social structures. In the context of environmental governance, the holy grail is a system that builds on local self-regulating institutions comprising local resource users, nesting them within an institutional framework that can take into account the causes and effects of local usages within the ecosystems of which they form a small part, giving voice to the many other interests at the local, national, transnational and global level, and yet still leaving intact the reality of local self-regulation. The case studies in this book provide fascinating accounts of the many ways and many contexts in which this has been attempted in Japan and elsewhere, and the acute difficulties in achieving it. They also demonstrate the heterogeneous complexities of the task, often compounded by the prospect of new types of commons emerging as traditional local institutions decline. These themes are developed throughout the book with meticulous scholarship and attention to detail, making this book an indispensable addition to interdisciplinary commons literature.