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Commons Sense on the Islands - Patrick Brown

It's now nearly forty years since Garrett Hardin wrote an essay entitled *The Tragedy of the Commons*. The commons, he explained, are those attributes of a community that are shared by all who live there: aspects of geography, environment, social and physical infrastructure that are freely available to all.

But, he said, their existence is almost invariably threatened by two destructive misconceptions.

The first misconception is that the commons are, by their nature, an unlimited resource, and that they will always be there, and that no particular effort need be taken to maintain them.

The second was that 'sharing' means that each member of the community has a right to an exclusive fraction of the commons, to use or to misuse as they wish.

The 'tragedy' of the commons, said Hardin, is that the combination of these two misconceptions eventually leads to the extinction of the commons; the attributes that make a community so attractive for living, or farming, or manufacturing, will eventually disappear. And that this will happen no matter what type or size of community is defined: from a small agrarian settlement dependent on common grazing lands, to a world dependent on a supply of unpolluted air.

To quote the subtitle of Hardin's essay: 'The population problem has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension in morality.'

The Commons on the Gulf Islands

The Gulf Islands have a generous bounty of commons. Asked to name them, most Islanders would start with the scenic beauty of the Islands, and would expand this to include the entire natural environment, including the waters of the Salish Sea, the gentle climate, good aquifers, and unpolluted air. When Islanders speak of 'Preserve and Protect', these are their first thoughts.

But let's go on. Suppose these Islands were somewhere else? Suppose they were not in Canada (considered one of the best countries in the world in which to live)? Suppose they were not so close to some very attractive and vibrant cities?

Location is a valuable aspect of the Gulf Islands' commons. But some of the virtues of that location depend on the existence of convenient and affordable transportation: our ferries. These

ferries are a 'commons', and it's not too hard to demonstrate that they have their limits, particularly on Friday nights in summertime.

Some of the commons are provided by government: roads, schools, police. Some are provided by commercial enterprises: electricity, good telephone service, television, internet access, groceries, building supplies, pubs. Some are provided by the community: health centres, community centres, churches, farmers' markets.

And, of course, neighbours, friends, and the community itself.

And some of the more abstract commons: time to think, talk, write, paint, make music; peace and personal safety, tolerance of eccentricity, being able to build and remodel your own house. In fact, the entire 'rural lifestyle'—often cited, hard to defined, but nonetheless, I submit, part of the commons.

Four Major Components to the Islands' Commons

How did the Islands arrive at this unique set of attributes? First, from the location and fundamental environment of the Islands, and the undeniable characteristic that they are surrounded by water. This may sound obvious, but the distinct shoreline boundaries of the each island community define its limits and its identity, and insulate it to some extent from the rest of the world.

Second, from the creation of a community with a critical mass of permanent residents: landowners who see themselves as stewards rather than exploiters of the land, and individuals who invested enough to contribute their time and effort to their communities.

Third, from the government structure and kinds of businesses which provide essential infrastructure and services.

Fourth, from the Islands Trust structure which legitimizes the Islands' unique approach to planning and growth, preservation and protection; and the individuals who serve their Islands as Trustees.

So part of the commons comes from nature, part from government, part from the community, and part from individual Islanders. The combination of these unique components is strong—yet it is a web, once broken, that is fragile and vulnerable.

And our Gulf Island commons is becoming more and more

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valued—and valuable. This is making real estate and vacation rentals expensive.

Taking From the Commons

Some give to, and some take from islands' commons. But no one has a right to sell the commons for profit.

Some sell dreams, or illusions; these fetch the best prices.

But fairness demands that selling access to the commons should be balanced by a contribution to the commons. And long-term takings, such as environmental damage, should be compensated for by long-term contributions to the Islands. Island life comes at a price beyond dollars.

Compensation for Commons Takings

Islands history records numerous inadequate and clumsy attempts to value this compensation in dollars. Here's a recent example: a 'resort' type development, which because of its size (123 strata cottages) if nothing else, inevitably will have a significant negative environmental impact on an Island.

'The resort is the first one in Canada to be designated 'Econutral,' in accordance with United Nations guidelines. The cottages' developers earned the title with a tradeoff: They planted trees in Manning Park, thereby offsetting the resort's environmental impact'—*The Province*, October 23, 2005).

This is a travesty. Trees are not scarce in Manning Park (where planting trees is, in fact, a provincial government responsibility); but drinking water, land, infrastructure,

community facilities, and ferry capacity are scarce on the Islands.

The bottom line is that those who expect to profit from this sort of development on the Island are taking that profit directly from the Island's commons. They are stealing that profit from the value built up by the Island community.

The Commons is Community Property

The people of the community create the commons, not for profit, either for themselves or for others. They create it as a means of living well: not living rich, but living with quality; a quality of human and community relationships that aspires to match the quality of the Island environment.

So, from the community's point of view, development on the Island must contribute more than money, or employment for the Island's labour force. It must bring citizens who will be committed to and contribute to the community over the long term; who will give back to the commons. Cut and run loggers, real estate speculators, developers for profit, and many never-resident property owners don't.

And it's the management of the commons that determines the quality of Island life. Islands have a limited capacity—for residents, and for visitors. Islanders need to determine what the limit is, and enforce it. Because beyond that capacity, the commons will be destroyed. ☞