

Eyebrow needed...

The Tragedy of the Enclosure

By George Monbiot

During the dry seasons in the far northwest of Kenya, the people of the Turkwel River keep themselves alive by feeding their goats on the pods of the acacia trees growing on the river's banks. Every clump of trees is controlled by a committee of elders, who decide who should be allowed to use them and for how long.

Anyone coming into the area who wants to feed his goats on the pods has to negotiate with the elders. Depending on the size of the pod crop, they will allow him in or tell him to move on. If anyone tries to browse his animals without negotiating first, he will be driven off with sticks; if he does it repeatedly, he may be killed. The acacia woods are a common: a resource owned by many families. Like all the commons of the Turkana people, they are controlled with fierce determination.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Turkana were battered by a combination of drought and raiding by enemy tribes. Many people came close to starvation, and the Kenyan government, the United Nations Development Program and the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization decided that something had to be done to help them. The authorities knew nothing of how the Turkana regulated access to their commons. What they saw was a succession of unrelated people moving in, taking as much as they wanted, then moving out again. It looked like a free-for-all, and the experts blamed the lack of regulation for the disappearance of the vegetation. This was, in fact, caused not by people but by the draught.

The authorities decided that the only way to stop the people from overusing their resources was to settle them down, get rid of most of their animals and encourage them to farm. On the banks of the Turkwel River they started a series of irrigation schemes, where the ex-nomads could own a patch of land and grow grain. People flocked in. With the first drought the irrigation scheme collapsed. The immigrants reverted to the only certain means of keeping themselves alive in the savannas: herding animals. They spread along the banks and into the acacia woods.

Overwhelmed by their numbers, the elders could do nothing to keep the outsiders away from the trees. The pods and the surrounding grazing land were swiftly exhausted, and people started to starve. The commons had become a free-for-all. The authorities had achieved exactly what they set out to prevent.

The overriding of commoner's rights has been taking place, often with similarly disastrous consequences, for centuries, all around the world. But

in the past two decades it has greatly accelerated. The impetus for much of this change came from a paper published some 25 years ago, whose title has become a catch phrase among developers.

In *The Tragedy of the Commons* the American biologist Garrett Hardin argued that common property will always be destroyed because the gain that individuals make by overexploiting it will outweigh the loss they suffer as a result of its overexploitation. He used the example of a herdsman who keeps his cattle on a common pasture. With every cow the man added to his herds, he would gain more than he lost: he would be one cow richer, and the community as a whole would bear the cost of the extra cow. He suggested that the way to prevent this tragedy was to privatize or nationalize common land.

The paper, published in *Science* in December, 1968, had an enormous impact. It neatly encapsulated a prevailing trend of thought and appeared to provide some answers to the growing problem of how to prevent starvation. For authorities such as the World Bank and Western governments, it offered a rational basis for the privatization of land. In Africa, among newly independent governments looking for dramatic change, it encouraged the massive transfer of land from tribal peoples to the state or to individuals.

But Hardin's paper had one critical flaw. He had assumed that individuals can be as selfish as they like in a commons because no one stops them. In reality, traditional commons are closely regulated by the people who live there. Common property has two elements: common and property. A common is the property of a particular community that, like the Turkana of the Turkwel River, decides who is allowed to use it and to what extent.

Hardin's thesis works only where no ownership exists. The oceans, possessed by no one and poorly regulated, are overfished and polluted. Every user tries to get as much out of them as possible, and the cost of their exploitation is borne by the world as a whole. These are not commons by free-for-all.

The effects of dismantling the commons to prevent Hardin's presumed tragedy can scarcely be overstated. While their impact has been felt by traditional peoples throughout the less developed world, no group has suffered more than those singled out by his paper: the traditional herders of animals, or pastoralists. In Kenya, the Masai have been cajoled into privatizing their commons: in some parts, every family now owns a small ranch. This has undercut the very basis of their survival.

In the varied and changeable savannas, the only way a herder can survive is by moving. The Masai followed the rain across their lands, leaving an area before its resources were exhausted and returning only when it recovered. Now, confined to a single plot, they have no alternative but to graze it until drought or overuse brings the vegetation to an end. When their herds die, entrepreneurs move in, buy up their lands for a song and either plow them for wheat and barley, exhausting the soil within a few years, or use them as collateral for securing business loans.

Around the world, changes in the ownership of land lie at the heart of our environmental crisis. Traditional rural communities use their commons to supply most of their needs. To keep themselves alive, they have to maintain a diversity of habitats, and within these habitats they need to protect a wide range of species. But when the commons are privatized, they pass into the hands of people whose priority is to make money. The most efficient means of making it is to select the most profitable product and concentrate on producing that. As the land is no longer the sole means of survival but an investment that can be exchanged, the new owners can, if necessary, overexploit it and reinvest elsewhere.

The diverse environments protected by the commons are replaced with uniform fields of grain or livestock. The displaced people move either to the overloaded cities or into new habitats, becoming poorer as they go, threatening the places they move to, sometimes dispossessing other commoners in turn. For human beings, as for the biosphere, the tragedy of the commons is not the tragedy of their existence but the tragedy of their disappearance. ■