

Presidential *Address*

The Way We Think

Erling Berge,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim Immediate Past President
IASCP

Part I: The Way We Think About IASCP

Introduction

IASCP has completed its first conference in Latin America. It is the tenth general conference of our association. Incidentally it is also 15 years since the association was founded. As associations go we are fairly young. But among the young anniversaries are important. One way of using them is to think a bit about where we came from, where we are, and where we want to go. We may even wonder if there is a discrepancy between where we want to go and where we are heading. You may want to think about that. Here I want to think about who we are or maybe rather who we think we are. The collective expression of what we think we should be doing is found in our mission statement. Our homepage displays the following:

“The International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASCP), founded in 1989, is a non-profit Association devoted to understanding and improving institutions for the management of environmental resources that are (or could be) held or used collectively by communities in developing or developed countries.”

CPR Digest no 67 and 68 have raised questions directly addressing our mission statement. Charlotte Hess, our Information Officer, in no 67, says that our mission statement is too restrictive seen in relation to what our members actually do. It may be leading outsiders into thinking we do other things than we actually do and thus possibly deter some people from getting involved in our discussions. This observation leads me to ask why we feel the statement restricts our identity today but apparently not in 1989. Was the statement of 1989 too ‘static’ in its approach to delimiting our field of interest? Amy R Poteet, in *CPR Digest no 68*, raises questions about conceptual consistency in our discussions. The focus is not on our mission statement, but on what we do as scientists. Yet, the question is as applicable to our collective identity: how can we describe what our mission is? What are the concepts we can use most effectively to communicate our field of interest? Should the concepts be well defined, internally consistent and able to communicate unambiguously across professional and cultural borders? I do not think anybody would oppose such concepts. But we all realise that such concepts do not exist. So, what is the next best solution?

Fuzzy concepts and marginal change

Some of the more commonly used concepts of science do not have clear boundaries. Consider for example ‘cause’ and ‘causation’. In fact, most concepts in natural languages do not have clear boundary rules. Meaning is established by usage rather than by definitions. Over time their meaning will change, mostly without being noticed by the users of the language. Even if the language of science is different in some respects it is surprisingly similar in most of its dynamic. Core concepts are not well defined, meanings are established by usage, evolve, and change across generations of users.

Could such properties of languages have any implications for a mission statement? Consider for example core concepts from our discussions such as: ‘common property’, ‘common pool resource’, and ‘commons’. In the program for the Oaxaca conference we find frequencies of use:

‘common property’ is mentioned 46 times

‘common pool’ is mentioned 18 times

‘resources’ 131 times

‘common pool resource/s’ 15 times

‘commons’ 128 times

‘community/ies’ are mentioned 226 times

Now, which concept should we choose in our mission statement? ‘Common property’ appears in our current mission statement, ‘commons’ does not. If usage were a vote commons and community would speak most broadly to what we actually do. However, to some extent the choice of words will have to be tailored to how specialised and focused we want our association to be or become. Therefore we also should consider the dynamics of languages. Should we choose fuzzy or well defined concepts?

In my view “commons” refers to a basic concept with a strong core speaking to and being understandable for most people, but without clear conceptual boundaries. While most people will be able to point to a commons they readily recognise, any two persons from different institutional contexts may have to discuss at some length to agree on similarities and differences in the classification of their favourite commons. It would seem reasonable to call it a fuzzy concept.

On the other hand, ‘common pool resource’ is not used in our mission statement, but it is a central concept in our discussion. This concept is well defined by a technical language in terms of subtractability and exclusion. Once definitions of subtractability and exclusion are accepted, the abstract idea of a common pool resource is clear with sharp boundaries. However, this may not always translate into easy identification of an object in the real world. Agreeing on whether any specific resource is or is not a common pool resource may sometimes be as hard as to agree on whether it is a commons. It will depend on how you understand subtractability and excludability. The institutional structure giving meaning to subtractability and exclusion is not included in the definition.

Nevertheless, it is implicitly there. Are, for example, real world examples of subtractability and exclusion defined independent of technology and transaction costs? Detailed investigations of the institutional structure governing each resource may be needed to determine whether the resource can be said to have common pool characteristics or not. In empirical work the clarity of the technical terms evaporates.

The concept ‘common property’ is used even in our name. Thus it should be the most basic concept in our identity. But what kind of image does this concept evoke for the uninitiated? My impression is that the most common understanding of the concept will associate to property rights and law, and if people do not know much about it, the first thing that comes to mind might be the common property of married couples or maybe the common property of condominium owners rather than a commons as we tend to think of it. To me it seems that while all common property according to our theoretical approach can be called a commons, not all commons will be common property in the legal sense. Now, contrary to what most people think, property rights are also in law a rather fuzzy concept. Most people will assume, as mainstream economics does, that only the Roman law *dominium plenum* can be considered real property rights. Those who do have not only missed the legal approach to property as a variable bundle of rights, they also have missed out on a basic feature of our institutional approach to resource management: that property rights in real life are negotiable and malleable. So what exactly does the concept ‘common property’ tell a stranger about us? Consider the different ideas evoked if our name contained the words ‘the Study of Commons and Property’ rather than ‘the Study of Common Property’!

Changing IASCP requires fuzzy concepts

Living systems have to adapt to their environment. Most adaptation occurs as an accumulation of small changes at various margins. The International Association for the Study of Common Property is a living system that will change, and we are better off changing at the margins rather than in sweeping reorganisations. Words comprise much of what we are. Thus, changing The International Association for the Study of Common Property means changing words. And as noted, meanings of words in natural languages change at the margin. To be able to adapt, our core concepts need fuzzy boundaries that enable us to change our activities at the margin, to discover new types of commons and to apply the theory to new aspects of resource governance. But there is another important aspect to the words we use that Charlotte Hess pointed to.

The way we think and institutional design

Charlotte Hess' concern, I think, is not so much the clarity of concepts as whether some scholars and practitioners feel at home in the Association. Will the mission statement tell them that what they do falls, as it were, within the jurisdiction of the Association? Are they entitled to bring their questions and concerns along, and can they expect others to want to discuss them?

If I read her concerns right, the clarity of concepts may not matter so much per se. What matters to such a problem is the framing of the concepts. What kinds of feelings, attitudes and values will the mission statement evoke? Is our mission inclusive of all types of commons? Seen like this we really have an interesting problem in institutional design. By some versions of our theory of commons, it would be reasonable to say that our association defines a commons. We are a group of people working together to manage and harvest essential goods from a resource held collectively. This resource is, of course, the fund of knowledge embodied in you and the texts that you have written or that you in other ways make relevant for the study of commons. "Knowledge commons" has been on our agenda for a long time. But are the characteristics of our common fund of knowledge such that we can call our association a commons? Does our theory apply to resources other than environmental resources? If we believe it does, or if we want to test if it does, we should not be deterred by the words used in our mission statement. Both the words we use and the way we frame them should encourage explorations at the margins of our fields of study.

There is also an important lesson for institutional design here. This lesson has always been common knowledge among good democratic politicians. The trick is to create an adaptable framework for guided evolution. We want a mission statement that helps us focus on what is important while it also allows us to explore new aspects and adapt to new perceptions of the world. We should not let ourselves become locked into some particular way of perceiving the world. We as well as the world will always be changing. Using fuzzy concepts will allow change. But how do we introduce guidance to the evolving system? Bureaucratic instructions or democratic discussions work sometimes, but either may be too slow, or, at worst, self-defeating. For an association like ours, I think guidance must come from a framework that affects **the way we think**, rather than **what** we think.

The way we think is important

Why would I think that the way we think is more important than what we think? There is an obvious link from what we want to what we get. But is **the way we think** about our activities important apart from what we want to achieve? And exactly what do I mean by "the way we think"? I am not sure I will be able to answer to your satisfaction. Probably not even to my own satisfaction. But I want to try. So let me start with an example:

A forester thinking differently

During a conference on forestry in Oslo we had an excursion to the large privately owned woods around Oslo. One of the foresters working there came along and explained how they managed the forest. Recently new regulations to promote biodiversity and sustainable forestry had been promulgated and I asked the forester what difference did the new regulations make. What were they doing differently now compared to before the regulations. The man thought about it for some time before he answered me: “No”, he said, “we don’t do things differently, but we think differently about what we do.” At the time, I was puzzled.

From a way of thinking to doing

What kind of difference is that? What practical implication would follow from thinking differently? Isn’t it what we actually do that makes a difference for biodiversity? Of course it is. But thinking is also doing something. So let me rephrase the question. When and how will the way we think about what we do have an impact on what we do? Phrased like this we see that how we think about what we do will be extremely important. It will be important at precisely those points in time when we have to choose among several options for action. If we think that sustainable forestry is as important as profits, we will choose differently than if we think only profits counts. If we think about ourselves that we are just and honest human beings we will react differently to new opportunities than if we think that we are allowed to cut corners as long as we are not caught at it. Two suggestions emerge. The way we think about what we do involves feelings, attitudes, and values. And the way we think about what we do involves the future more than the present.

The way to think about IASCP

Can we apply a distinction between what we think about and the way we think about it to the International Association for the Study of Common Property? As I show in the table, I think we can. There would seem to be two kinds of mechanisms linking the goals of the Association and the activities we engage in. One mechanism defines what we do; the other defines the standards of performance when we do it. This is one way of approaching the difference between what we think about and the way we think about it. In fact, I think it may be a reasonable conjecture to say that institutions for self governance need to shape **the way people think** about their problems rather than **what people think** about their problems. This is a hypothesis you may want to test more rigorously. But I believe we should apply this as a design principle to our mission statement. The International Association for the Study of Common Property needs to be an Association where a diversity of views feels at home.

Part II: The Way We Think About Protected Lands

Shaping the way people think: an example from Norway

More generally, I think that as a field of study ‘the way we think’ can be identified as the cultural foundation of the social and economic institutions structuring the incentives we react to. Think about that: What does “Structuring of incentives” actually mean? Does the way we think actually contribute a structure to the incentives we face? To me it seems to be an interesting way of approaching the creation of protected areas of various types. Let us take a brief excursion to some mountains in the West Fjords of Norway that are in the middle of being defined as a protected area. Interesting things are happening here. People are starting to think differently about these mountains. The mountains that people think about are unchanging, but the way they think about them is changing.

By the terminology of our Association these mountains are a commons and have always been a commons. But in the Norwegian language they are not called by the word usually translated as commons. Rather it

will translate approximately as private common property. The mountains are the common property of the farms in the valley. They are not the common property of the farmers, but of the farms. The resources found in the mountains are an integral part of what made farming possible here in the far north at the margin of where people are supposed to survive on agriculture. This has now started to change. Farming has been changing rapidly for more than one generation. The mountain resources are now of much less significance for farming, but are still used extensively. More important than the slow changes in agricultural activities is the fact that central authorities have begun to think differently of these mountains. For almost a generation they have been of the opinion that the mountains need protection. The proposal to protect them was first published in 1986, alarming the local population. Now the authorities are about to get their ambition fulfilled. The mountains are included in the Geiranger-Herdalen Protected Landscape Area which currently is in the process of being established. And furthermore, these mountains are also part of Norway's "West Norwegian Fjords" nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List (details can be found at <http://www.dirnat.no/archive/attachments/01/58/UNESC033.pdf>). A decision is expected in 2005. So something is definitely going on around these mountains.

This "going on", however, among both the central authorities and the local population does not concern anything that is actually happening or about to happen in the area. It is all about the future. Except for less use by the local farmers absolutely no real world activities are noticeable in these mountains. Neither the local farmers, nor the local municipal authorities have any plans that might alter the mountains in any significant way. Still there is a widespread perception at the national level that the mountains need protection. What does it mean to protect the land in such a situation?

The original desire to protect is clearly induced by certain possibilities that large scale modern capitalism affords us. In Norway the central environmental authorities see these forces at work in the increasing use of motorised access to the wilderness, and also in the widespread local desire to develop hydro-electric power and large scale tourism. These three indicators of the destructive possibilities of modern society can alternatively be seen as examples of the local desire to create activities that may generate income for the local population and the local community. The desire of a local population and community to adapt their activities to new opportunities and their goal of long term survival are easily recognized across the globe. But how do you protect against possibilities afforded by technology and wishes entertained by local people? By the concept introduced above we can say that as a society Norway has to create institutions structuring the incentives people perceive and act on. One may for example make unwanted activities unprofitable. But is that what the central authorities actually do in this case?

The local population is convinced and also many others will say that we have all the protection we might need against unwanted activities in the general legislation on planning and building and the procedures leading up to the necessary permissions for development of natural resources. So what do we achieve by creating protected areas? The way we do it in Norway achieves two objectives, with one unintended and unwanted consequence. The intended and much publicised objective is to alert the people of Norway, and even the world, to the values and qualities of the landscape. The intended but not communicated objective is to transfer some power from local to central authorities. The unintended outcome is to make farming less adaptable to changing circumstances and the farmers less trusting of central authorities.

There is no doubt that compared to the status quo situation of no protected area any kind of protected area will give central authorities powers they did not have before. The interesting thing is that the current round of establishing protected areas occurs in a flurry of decentralisation policy experiments. The Norwegian parliament has expressly demanded decentralised management of protected areas and in all recently established areas forms of comanagement are being tested out. At the same time one may observe that in the oldest area with a form of local management, central authorities are now moving some powers from local to more central authorities and the recently established (1996) nature police is expanded and starting to replace locally established supervisory systems.

The unintended outcome follows from the detailed regulation of the activities of the local population. The guiding principle for such rules, judging from similar areas in other parts of the country, seems to be that nothing new will be allowed to happen within the protected area. In theory the local population can go on doing the things they always have been doing. On-going activities are not supposed to be affected. But if the farmers want to do something in a different way, if they want to introduce new technology or need new buildings, roads or other tools to exploit the resources in the protected area, they need permission from the authorities that promulgated the protection. Compared to areas without protection the new rules will increase the transaction costs of those that have land within the protected area. This may reduce the human made component of the landscape and will thus also alter the values being emphasised as a reason for the protected area. So what has been achieved in relation to the threat from the large scale forces of modernization? I think the main achievement is to force Norwegians to think differently about these areas. By designating them as Protected Landscape Areas they have been imbued with values that were not there before. They have been given a common value for all Norwegians. This will make it harder for everyone who wants to make changes to the landscape, not only the local stakeholders but also actors with more resources and more power to intervene will have to think twice. Thus, indeed, the area is better protected against the forces of development. But this increased protection probably comes at a cost not considered. One possible consequence may be that other areas, areas not protected in this way, more easily become subject to development. In theory this should not be a consequence. But by defining what areas are needed to protect Norwegian nature in its pristine form and provide area for recreation, the implication is that the rest of the land can be used in a more unconstrained way. Outside the protected areas it will feel like there are fewer restrictions on possible future activities. The way people think about the unprotected areas will change subtly.

Another possible consequence is that for many areas a significant change may be that not only Norwegians in general, but local farmers in particular have started to think differently. The significance here will be that the way they have started to think differently may be detrimental to our current system of constraining the future usages of an area. To many local farmers it would seem that the “state” in the process of creating protection of the landscape has become a bit more of an adversary, maybe not much more than before, but closer and more tangible. To them the state has become a little less “our state”. The dissatisfaction of the local population may not matter much for the landscape in this case. The locals do not have the power to do much to alter either the landscape or the policy even if they wanted. But the way they have started to think differently about the state easily carries over to other issues. Less trust in one area means less trust in other areas. Less trust may in this case mean more costly regulations in the future.

Concluding

To sum up: the creation of a protected area will as a minimum achieve one real world consequence: transfer of power from local to central stakeholders and several institutional constraints on the future through alterations in the way people think about what they do, some of these no doubt unintended. The link between social and economic institutions and the way people think about what they do is probably a dimension in need of attention in institutional design. The lesson for Norwegian authorities would be that one must pay attention not only to what the institution makes people think they have to do, but also to the way people think about what they have to do. I think Norwegian environmental authorities have failed to consider the latter.

Now, returning to the question we started with. Should we as an Association care about how our members think about their activities within the association? If you sense that my answer to this is yes, you are right. And the way to shape our way of thinking is, I believe, best approached by shaping our mission statement. What we as an association shall actually do is expressed in our bylaws. But the way we think about what we do, the feelings and attitudes and values we want to emphasis by our activities should be expressed in the mission statement. Incentives are entities mostly found in the future. Many, maybe most

of them have an existence in time that also may include here and now. But the incentive part is in the future. What does it mean to say that institutions are structuring incentives? What is the link between what exists today and the future? What is the role of “the way we think” in this link?

I suspect that most of the time we change the way we think without really noticing that that is what is happening. Thus, studies of and efforts to create institutional structures that guide the evolution of activities rather than prescribe them should be given more attention in the theory of institutions.