CPR FORUM RESPONSE
The Information Commons and IASCP
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Throughout its short history, the focus of most IASCP research has been natural resource management. The primary mission of our organization has been to improve institutions "for the management of environmental resources" (see: http://www.iascp.org/brochure.html). But in the past eight years since the 1995 Norway conference "Reinventing the Commons" increasing attention has been given to other types of commons: highways, playgrounds, apartment buildings, and the Internet, to name a few. The information/knowledge commons deserves a prominent position in our consciousness and as an area of study because of its crucial importance to all of us. Bollier provides a useful summary of one of the most troubling arenas of this commons: copyright legislation and the enclosure of knowledge that used to be open and free.

While we are all aware of the benefits of the Internet, the threats arising from the same technology are less apparent. New information technologies have the ability to capture previously untapped information resources through computer code. The combined forces of recent legislation, market forces, and social complacency, have the capacity to erode public access to information. Enclosed public knowledge impedes democratic processes, informed citizenry, open science, free libraries, artistic and scientific innovation, and our decision-making capabilities for sustainable environmental management. Much is being written today on the information commons, from the effects of recent intellectual property-rights legislation, economic commodification of ideas, over-patenting, the move from property law to contract law in electronic publishing, the effects of new copyright laws on libraries and the academy, to issues of westerncentrism, piracy of indigenous knowledge, and the north/south digital divide. Almost all studies are concerned with the idea of the "commons," rather than common property or common-pool resources. While the "commons" is a well-worn term, there have not been any systematic analyses, as far as I know, of this more general term. The "commons" is a much more general concept than "common property." It conveys a sense of "shared-ness" or "jointness." The word is often used instead of an "open-access public good." The "commons" can carry a moral weight. It is connected to a sense of a birthright and closely linked to the "common good," or the "common heritage of humankind." Is there room for "information" as a resource type or a place for the "commons" within IASCP?

If so, how do we get our hands around this huge, complex topic, especially when the resource at hand information is often intangible? A first step was James Boyle's Conference on the Public Domain (PD) at Duke University in 2001, which brought together for the first time a wide range of interdisciplinary scholars and artists (see Law and Contemporary Problems, 66[1&2] at http://www.law.duke.edu/journals/lcp).

Boyle's suggestion of using the environmental movement as a model and crafting a new language resonated with many of the participants. Understanding the information "ecosystem" would enable scientists, musicians, information specialists, indigenous groups, resource practitioners, teachers, and policymakers to see their shared interest in the preservation of public knowledge.

The next step is the development of a new research agenda that examines and pulls together the disparate threads of the "knowledge commons." Much of the study thus far has focused on U.S. Legislation, economics, and dilemmas. But clearly, public knowledge is a global commons. Questions

of equity, reciprocity, and "common but differentiated responsibilities" must also be considered. This global commons, threatened by enclosing intellectual property laws, can only be managed with increased awareness, vigilance, and action at the local level.

We not only need a new vocabulary, we need to go beyond the 1985 Oakerson framework and develop an adaptable analytical framework that incorporates complexity, scale, and rapid change. Besides the legal and economic issues, cultural, moral, and behavioral questions need to be addressed as well.

Ultimately, responsibility for the collection, management, and preservation of knowledge is upon us all. There are many collective-action initiatives that may help sustain the knowledge commons: from grassroots networks such as SRISTI's Honey Bee, the preservation of traditional knowledge and languages, to self-governing digital libraries.

Information about physical resources is itself an important common-pool resource. Can we draw from what we have learned from natural resource commons in order to better understand the information ecosystem? As Lele, Hill and others have pointed out in these pages, the commons has indeed been "pixilized." We need better focus and a clearer picture.

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