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Editorial: The 20th anniversary of Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons*

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Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons* (Ostrom 1990) celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2010. Since its appearance, the book has changed the agenda of commons research and practice. True to its title, it has sparked a search for ways to actually *govern* the commons – rather than simply declaring them anachronisms, for which there is no place in a world that looks to develop sustainably. Additionally, whereas since 1968 the commons debate was dominated by the ideas of one biologist, *Governing the Commons* opened up the quest for further understanding of commons questions to a great many other disciplines. In this special feature project we have sought to emphasize both aspects of the impact of the book.

I. From deconstructing to *governing* the commons

Between 1968 and 1990, Garrett Hardin pretty much set the agenda of commons management practice and – to a somewhat lesser extent – scholarship. This agenda emphasized *deconstructing* rather than *governing* the commons – proposing and actively working to convert common pool resources (CPRs) into either private or public goods, instead. Numerous cohorts of practitioners were trained according

¹ Berge started the work on this special feature while he was on the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Political Science at The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). The editors are grateful for the economic support from NTNU that made this special feature possible.

to the gospel of Hardin: Barrett and Mabry (2002) find that the *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968) is the article that American biologists consider to have had the greatest impact in their career training. Apart from a small but growing niche of commons scholars (Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop 1975; McCay and Acheson 1987; National Research Council 1986; Van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007), the academic debate on CPRs during this era did mostly not accept – or even was not willing to consider – the fact that under certain conditions groups of individuals can sustainably govern a commonly held resource. For example, around the time that Elinor Ostrom’s *Governing the Commons* appeared Colin W. Clarke – in an otherwise reasonably sophisticated survey of resource economics – labelled common ownership of resources as one of the fundamental *anti-sustainability* biases (Clarke 1991, 321).

Two decades after the publication of *Governing the Commons*, it has become accepted wisdom that under certain circumstances communities are able to govern CPRs on their own, without intervention of the state and without having to privatize the resource. At the research frontier the goal is no longer to prove that Hardin was wrong, but to determine the limits of self-governance of CPRs: exactly under which conditions would privatization be the best option and under which conditions would governments have to step in, for example, to enable the local community to work out their own governance system?

Our claim that Hardin’s *Tragedy of the Commons* no longer holds a monopoly over the commons debate is illustrated by Figure 1. At least, since 1996 (the starting year in the Scopus data base used to build this figure) *Governing the Commons* offers a solid alternative to those interested in the sustainable governance of CPRs.

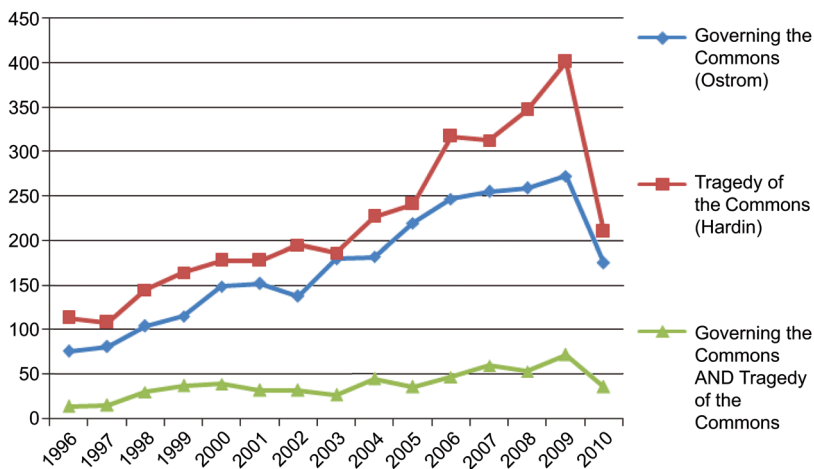


Figure 1: Citation numbers for *Governing the Commons* (Ostrom) and *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin).

2. From one biologist's idea to a truly interdisciplinary approach

However, the impact of *Governing the Commons* went much further than this. The book became a classic, more or less instantly. Since 1996, it has been cited in peer-reviewed journal articles that are indexed by Scopus², no less than 2600 times. Many people besides resource governance scholars have read the book, and found inspiration for developing new ideas in seemingly unrelated fields. One may speculate why it had such a broad impact. Its immediate impact, particularly in resource economics, had a lot to do with its combination of game theoretical model-based arguments and empirical observations. The science was rigorous and the most critical readers had to conclude that the results were valid. But in order to understand the impact *outside* the circle of students of natural resource governance, we have to look beyond this obvious characteristic of the book.

According to a long-held, conventional view, there are *private goods* on the one end, and *public goods* on the other. This dichotomous view perceives the *market* as taking care of the provision, production and distribution of *private goods* – goods that are exhaustive and which can be fenced off from usage by those who do not pay for them. Citizens are *consumers* and the government has to step in every now and then, in order to correct market distortions (e.g. monopolies, externalities, and information asymmetries). The *government* is seen as being responsible for the delivery and allocation of *public goods*. These goods are not exhaustive and even those who have not contributed to (or paid for) their production, can still utilize and benefit from them. Citizens are *constituents* when dealing with public goods. The private sector is not supposed to be interested in public goods, since no money can be made from them. The perceived dichotomy was for long reflected in the disciplinary division of areas of interest: economists studied private goods, and public goods were examined by political scientists.

Ostrom's work – her book *Governing the Commons* in particular – has challenged this view and the disciplinary consequences thereof. Solving problems in the public sphere in practice, it turns out, is not always the exclusive domain of governments. Citizens can be found to engage in self-organized forms of collective action with the purpose of providing and producing public goods or CPRs. Private-sector business actors initiate or participate in activities related to the creation of public goods and CPRs in ways that neither old-time economists, nor conventional political scientists would have held them capable of doing. More often even, problems in the public arena are resolved as the result of the interaction between multiple actors: government agents; civil society actors; and private sector entrepreneurs.

Governing the Commons provided an alternative analytical paradigm for the study of phenomena which previously were hard to understand. The book opened the way for a genuine inter-disciplinary approach to the solutions of problems

² www.scopus.com

Table 1: (Co-) authors citing *Governing the Commons* (1996–2010).

Name	# of G/C citations	Sub-affiliation	Affiliation	Country
Berkes, F	16	Natural Resources Institute	University of Manitoba	Canada
Folke, C	16	Stockholm Resilience Center, Dept of Systems Ecology	University of Stockholm	Sweden
Agrawal, A	15	School of Natural Resources and Environment	University of Michigan	USA
Dasgupta, P	11	Faculty of Economics and Politics	University of Cambridge	UK
Kant, S	10	Faculty of Forestry	University of Toronto	Canada
Platteau, JP	10	Dept of Economics	University of Namur	Belgium
Acheson, JM	8	School of Marine Sciences	University of Maine	USA
Andersson, K	8	Political Science Dept	University of Colorado	USA
Jentoft, S	8	Norwegian College of Fishery Science	University of Tromsø	Norway
Meinzen-Dick, RS	8		International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)	USA
Pretty, J	8	Dept of Biological Sciences	University of Essex	UK
Baland, JM	7	Dept of Economics	University of Namur	Belgium
Bardhan, P	7	Dept of Economics	University of California at Berkeley	USA
Beard, VA	7	Dept of Planning, Policy and Design	University of California at Irvine	USA
Cardenas, JC	7	Dept of Economics	Universidad de los Andes	Colombia
Christie, P	7	School of Marine Affairs and Jackson School of International Studies	University of Washington	USA
Cinner, JE	7	Australian Research Council Center of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies	James Cook University	Australia
Dinar, S	7	Dept of Politics and International Relations	Florida International University	USA
Gintis, H	7	Dept of Economics	University of Massachusetts	USA
Paavola, J	7	School of Earth and Environment	University of Leeds	UK
Rydin, Y	7	Bartlett School of Planning	University College London	UK
Shivakoti, GP	7	School of Environment, Resources, and Development	Asian Institute of Technology	Thailand
Van Vugt, M	7	Dept of Psychology	University of Kent	UK
Weber, EP	7	Dept of Political Science	Washington State University	USA
Bowles, S	6	Behavioral Sciences Program	Santa Fe Institute	USA
Dayton-Johnson, J	6	Dept of Economics	Dalhousie University	Canada
Edwards-Jones, G	6	School of the Environment and Natural Resources	Bangor University	UK

Table 1: (Continued)

Name	# of <i>G/C</i> citations	Sub-affiliation	Affiliation	Country
Feitelson, E	6	Dept of Geography	The Hebrew University of Jerusalem	Israel
German, L	6	Forests and Governance Programme	Center for Internat. Forestry Research (CIFOR)	Indonesia
Gibson, CC	6	Dept of Political Science	University of California at San Diego	USA
Haller, T	6	Dept of Social and Cultural Anthropology	University of Zurich	Switzerland
Heikkilä, T	6	School of Public Affairs	University of Colorado	USA
Hønneland, G	6		The Fridtj of Nansen Institute	Norway
Hukkinen, J	6	Dept of Social Policy	University of Helsinki	Finland
Kaiser, MJ	6	School of Ocean Sciences	Bangor University	UK
McCarthy, N	6		International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)	USA
Scholz, JT	6	Dept of Political Science	Florida State University	USA
Sell, J	6	Dept of Sociology	Texas A&M University	USA
Sikor, T	6	Faculty of Social Sciences	University of East Anglia	UK
Steins, NA	6		Marine Stewardship Council	Netherlands
Tanner, S	6	Dept of Anthropology	University of Georgia	USA
VanDenBergh, J	6	Climate Change Research Network	Vanderbilt University Law School	USA
Adger, W	5	School of Environmental Sciences and CSERGE	University of East Anglia	UK
Brinkerhoff, JM	5	Dept of Public Administration	George Washington University	USA
Cleaver, F	5	Development and Project Planning Centre	University of Bradford	UK
Crona, BI	5	Stockholm Resilience Center	University of Stockholm	Sweden
DeCremer, D	5	Dept of Experimental Psychology	University of Maastricht	Netherlands
Edwards, VM	5	Dept of Land and Construction Management	University of Portsmouth	UK
Eggertsson, T	5	School of Business	University of Iceland	Iceland
Fernandez-	5	Dept of Forest, Rangeland, and Watershed Stewardship	University of Colorado	USA
Gimenez, ME				
Gardner, RJ	5	Dept of Economics	Indiana University	USA
Gelcich, S	5	School of Agricultural and Forest Sciences	University of Wales	UK
Imperial, MT	5	Dept of Public Administration	University of North Carolina	USA
Janssen, MA	5	School of Human Evolution and Social Change	Arizona State University	USA
Klooster, D	5	Dept of Geography	University of California at Los Angeles	USA

Table 1: (Continued)

Name	# of <i>GtC</i> citations	Sub-affiliation	Affiliation	Country
Koppenjan, JFM	5	Dept of Public Administration	Erasmus University	Netherlands
Kreuter, UP	5	Dept of Ecosystem Science and Management	Texas A&M University	USA
Lam, WF	5	Dept of Politics and Public Administration	University of Hong Kong	China
Lubell, M	5	Dept of Political Science	Florida State University	USA
Mahoney, JT	5	Dept of Business Administration	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	USA
Mandondo, A	5	Institute of Environmental Studies	University of Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe
Matsuda, Y	5	Dept of Marine Social Sciences	Kagoshima University	Japan
Nagendra, H	5	The Center for the Study of Institutions, Population, and Environmental Change (CIPEC)	Indiana University	USA
Pender, J	5	Economic Research Service	Department of Agriculture (USA Government)	USA
Peterson, GD	5	Dept of Geography and McGill School of the Environment	McGill University	Canada
Pomeroy, RS	5		World Fish Center	Malaysia
Poteete, A	5	Dept of Political Science	Concordia University	Canada
Ray, I	5	Energy and Resources Group	University of California at Berkeley	USA
Reuveny, R	5	School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA)	Indiana University	USA
Ribot, JC	5	Dept of Geography	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	USA
Robbins, P	5		EcoHealth Consulting	UK
Ruttan, LM	5	Dept of Environmental Studies	Emory University	USA
Satria, A	5	Faculty of Human Ecology	Bogor Agricultural University	Indonesia
Schweik, CM	5	Dept of Environmental Conservation	University of Massachusetts	USA
Shrestha, KK	5		Nepal Agricultural Research Council	Nepal
Squires, D	5		Southwest Fisheries Science Center	USA
Tang, CP	5	Dept of Political Science	National Chung Cheng University	Taiwan
Webb, EL	5	Dept of Biological Sciences	National University of Singapore	Singapore
Wilson, RK	5	Dept of Political Science	Rice University	USA
Young, OR	5	Donald Bren School of Environmental Science and Management	University of California at Santa Barbara	USA

Table 2: Journals citing *GtC* 10 times or more (1996–2010).

Journal title	# of <i>GtC</i> citations	Current editor's disciplinary background
World Development	79	Geography
Ecological Economics	74	Economics
Human Ecology	65	Anthropology
Ecology and Society	60	Ecology
Society and Natural Resources	52	Forestry
Marine Policy	45	Geography
Environmental Management	27	Ecology
Human Organization	27	Anthropology
Development and Change	25	Economics
Environment and Development Economics	25	Economics
Forest Policy and Economics	24	Economics
Ocean and Coastal Management	24	Biology
Journal of Environmental Management	23	Geography
Public Administration Review	23	Public Adm.
Conservation Biology	20	Biology
Environmental Conservation	20	Ecology
Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization	19	Economics
Journal of Development Studies	16	Geography
Land Use Policy	16	Geography
Environmental and Resource Economics	15	Economics
Geoforum	15	Geography
Policy Sciences	15	Policy Studies
Public Choice	15	Economics
Ambio	13	Biology
Journal of International Development	13	Sociology
Local Environment	13	Geography
Policy Studies Journal	13	Public Adm.
Global Environmental Change	12	Economics
Journal of Environment and Development	12	Sociology
Journal of Environmental Planning and Management	12	Economics
Coastal Management	11	Biology
Conservation Ecology*	11	n.a.
Environment and Planning A	11	Geography
Land Economics	11	Economics
Public Administration and Management	11	Public Adm.
Administration and Society	10	Public Adm.
Agricultural Systems	10	Economics
Ecological Applications	10	Ecology
Journal of Development Economics	10	Economics
Journal of Economic Issues	10	Economics
Journal of Sustainable Forestry	10	Forestry

*Appears currently as 'Ecology and Society'.

related with the provision and production of public goods and CPRs. These solutions – in one way or the other – often come down to overcoming collective action dilemmas. Ostrom's way of framing problems related with public goods and CPRs leaves ample room for the study of *social systems* – i.e. the behavior

of people as individuals, as group members, as actors in a market setting or in a public economy, as administrators, as members of a civic society, as participants in a culture, etc. Her approach also allows for the involvement of students of *ecological systems* – i.e. the biophysical world that co-determines the very nature of the type of problems that the provision or the production of public goods or CPRs poses.

Since the publication of *Governing the Commons*, we find for example economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, legal scholars, geographers, biologists, ecologists, foresters, hydrologists, and students of public administration leaning on Ostrom's work to craft their arguments with regard to their take on problem solving in the public sphere (Table 1). Furthermore, we find that peer-reviewed journals catering to audiences from an equally wide variety of disciplines have opened up to contributions representing Ostrom's approach to *Governing the Commons* (Table 2).

Representatives from these disciplines were therefore not at all surprised to receive our invitation to participate in a special feature project on the impact of *Governing the Commons*. We provided our authors with one simple cue: what has been the meaning of *Governing the Commons* for your field of study? The first results of our ongoing project are presented in this journal issue. The exercise will come to a conclusion in the 2011 August issue of the *International Journal of the Commons*. Then we will also present an editorial synthesis of all the contributions.

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