

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: "The Past is Not another Country: The Long-term Historical Development of Commons as a Source of Inspiration for Research and Policy," by Tine DeMoer

Making History Matter

Brad Walters

Department of Geography & Environment, Mount Allison University, Canada

The study of collective action and common property resource management could be deeply enriched by research that adopts a more explicit, analytically historical perspective. However, "the past is another country" presents the study of historical commons as if this remains a distinct disciplinary pursuit from that of contemporary socio-economic approaches. In so doing, it tends to re-enforce a counter-productive and arguably false dualism between the historically "descriptive" and the contemporary social "scientific." It further argues that the value of historical studies be measured in terms of their contribution to the development of general commons theory. In short, historical information is seen as a kind of untapped pool of empirical information that can be put to the test of contemporary theory. But some of us would argue that historical analysis is scientific in its own right, at least wherein it involves the intentional search for and rigorous testing of causal relationships between changes or events over time.

Taking this view, the development and refinement of general commons theory in the social sciences is secondary to the goal of pursuing and establishing robust causal-historical explanations about things that are of interest to us. In short, let us use theory to serve our needs for better understanding, rather than place our investigations at the service of testing or proving some predetermined theory or model. My own experience is that, where historical information is sought to better understand present day patterns of collective action and commons management, findings are ambiguous, and tend to challenge, if not sharply contradict existing theory and assumptions. Secure land tenure encouraged tree planting in some communities, yet insecure tenure was a primary motive for tree planting in others. The same people who practiced sound resource management at one point in time destroyed those same resources at a later date. Heavy-handed state management of a critical ecological area failed in the 1980s, but then recovered to succeed in the 1990s. And so on. It was not difficult in each of these cases to explain the contradictions, but accepted theories and models of collective action and commons management were often not needed to do so (Walters et al., 1999; Walters, 2004).

In short, careful attention to history tends to humble, not empower general theory. But in so doing, it puts theory in its proper place; namely, in the service of (but not the direction of) researchers who seek to explain why collective action and commons management emerge, persist and decline at particular points in times and in particular places. Detailed written records of the kind called for in "the past is not another country" are scarce for most of the developing world. Here, oral history remains the most ready source of information about the past and the tools of ethnography the most valuable for retrieving it. While knowledge of the distant past may

be unobtainable, critical insights can be gained from oral histories of memorable past events and their causal influence on present-day patterns of behavior, social organization and resource management (Walters *et al.* 1999). Theory and models about collective action can assist in our piecing together some of the puzzles, but researchers should be willing to set these aside and embrace the unexpected and idiosyncratic as these emerge during the course of study.

For Further Reading:

Walters, B. B., A. Cadelina, A. Cardano, and E. Visitacion. 1999. Community history and rural development: Why some farmers participate more readily than others. *Agricultural Systems* 59:193- 214.

Walters, B. B. 2004. Local management of mangrove forests in the Philippines: Successful conservation or efficient resource exploitation? *Human Ecology* 32:177-195.

bwalters@mta.ca