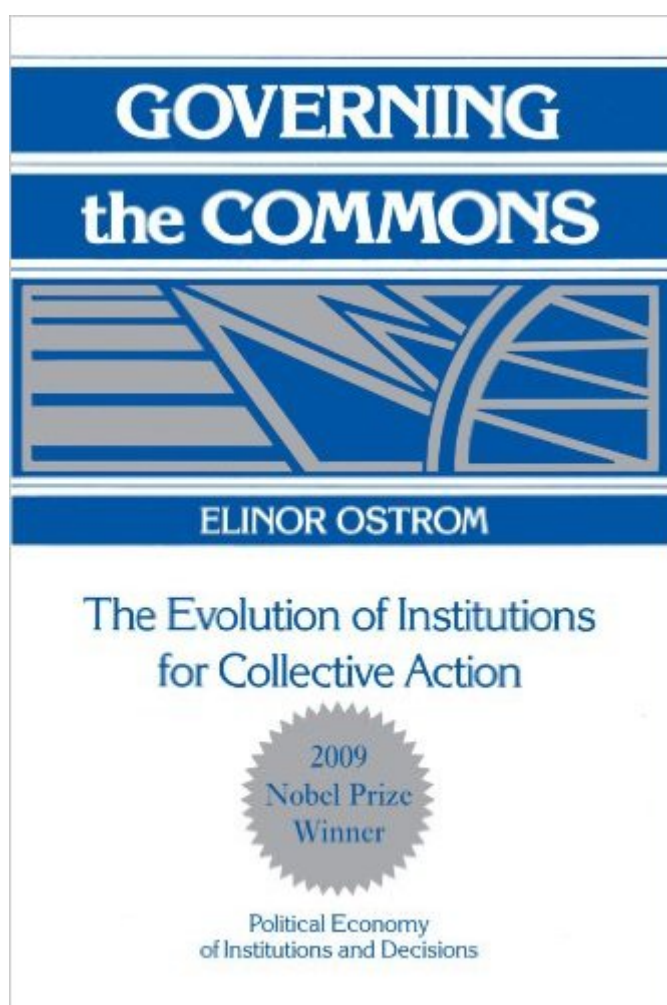


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# Governing The Commons: The Evolution Of Institutions For Collective Action (Political Economy Of Institutions And Decisions)



## Synopsis

Congratulations to Elinor Ostrom, Co-Winner of The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2009! The governance of natural resources used by many individuals in common is an issue of increasing concern to policy analysts. Both state control and privatization of resources have been advocated, but neither the state nor the market have been uniformly successful in solving common pool resource problems. After critiquing the foundations of policy analysis as applied to natural resources, Elinor Ostrom here provides a unique body of empirical data to explore conditions under which common pool resource problems have been satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily solved. Dr. Ostrom first describes three models most frequently used as the foundation for recommending state or market solutions. She then outlines theoretical and empirical alternatives to these models in order to illustrate the diversity of possible solutions. In the following chapters she uses institutional analysis to examine different ways--both successful and unsuccessful--of governing the commons. In contrast to the proposition of the tragedy of the commons argument, common pool problems sometimes are solved by voluntary organizations rather than by a coercive state. Among the cases considered are communal tenure in meadows and forests, irrigation communities and other water rights, and fisheries.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In this ambitious, provocative, and very useful book Ostrom combines a lucid theoretical framework

with a series of diverse and richly detailed case studies...she tightly reviews and critiques extant models of cooperation and collective action and argues powerfully that communities of actors are sometimes able to maintain a common resource for long periods of time without outside intervention." Contemporary Sociology"Ostrom's book is an important contribution to the problems of Common Property Resources that is, the lack of well-defined property rights over a certain resource. Elinor Ostrom convincingly shows that there are many different viable mixtures between public and private, in particular self-organization and self-governance by the users of the common property resource. The book makes fascinating reading, particularly as it is well written." Bruno S. Frey, Kyklos"This is an important book that deserves to be read widely in the policy community as well as the scholarly community....this analysis leaves us with provocative questions whose examination promises to broaden and deepen our understanding of human/environment relationships at many levels." Oran R. Young, International Environmental Affairs"Cambridge University Press has published an impressive series called 'The Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions.' Elinor Ostrom, Professor of Political Science at Indiana University, has made an important contribution to the series with Governing the Commons....In large part, the book is a fascinating and detailed examination of common ownership of various natural resources." Dean Lueck, Constitutional Political Economy"Students of common-property resource regimes will find much of great interest in the volume." Barry C. Field, Land Economics"...timely, well-written, and a useful addition to our understanding of the challenges of natural resource management....useful for undergraduate and graduate students as well as field practitioners interested in the development of scientifically based research. It provides a firm grounding in the theoretical underpinnings that should guide empirical investigations....Ostrom offers a unique source of information on the realities of resource management institutions coupled with the challenge for continued examination of institutions in order to develop better ways to address the CPR challenge." Gordon L. Brady, Southern Economic Journal"Ostrom's book makes an important contribution to the emerging literature on analytical institutional economics. Her work reminds us that analysis of institutions and institutional change is an important aspect of a broader political economy that underlies meaningful economic policy advice." Daniel W. Bromley, Journal of Economic Literature"This is the most influential book in the last decade on thinking about the commons. For those involved with small communities...located in one nation, whose lives depend on a common pool of renewable resources....Governing the Commons has been the intellectual field guide." Whole Earth"A classic by one of the best-known thinkers on communities and commons." Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures

Neither the state nor the market have been successful in solving common pool resource problems. This study accordingly analyzes communal interests in land, irrigation communities, fisheries, etc. and proposes alternative solutions.

I read this book shortly after I had read *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Spectre) and my first impression is that the book should be re-issued in 2015, a quarter-century after it was first published, with additional material on how everything here is applicable to governing the cyber-commons. I have to recommend the two books together -- STOP THIEF lays down with deep historical and multi-cultural foundation that gives GOVERNING THE COMMONS even more credibility -- and for those that do not realize, this book earned the author a Nobel Prize in Economics. On that note, I would point out that this book crushes the traditional explanations for why the state or the firm are superior decision-making alternatives to bottom-up citizen common sense. This book is also consistent with the LOSING proposal to the Club of Rome that recommended we focus on educating the global public (a universal bottom-up approach). As well now know, the Club of Rome chose the wrong solution, *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*, because it is assumed that top-down mandated measures were the only measures that could be effective. I am posting to the image section for this book a depiction of bottom up long term consensus thinking versus top down elite mandate thinking, something I created in the 1990's after reading *Human scale*. Subsequently I read *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* and many other books focused on collective intelligence and they all, without exception, support this author's premise that the only sustainable effective decision-structures for very complex and constantly changing environments are those that blend LOCAL observation, LOCAL rule-making, and LOCAL monitoring and enforcement. Two recurring themes across the author's case studies characterized by SUCCESS deal with information on the one hand and learning on the other. 01 INFORMATION -- lots of it, very detailed, in real-time, constantly updated, always shared, is the heart of getting it right. In every instance where successful Common-Pool Resources have been managed ably, there has existed an information advantage that cannot be replicated by corporations or governments. 02 LEARNING -- always incremental, always trial & error, always with pooling and blending of local and scientific knowledge. A major recurring theme across the case studies characterized by FAILURE is that of FEAR OF THE FUTURE. What this means is that the affected population is so afraid of the future and so untrusting of their local government that they heavily discount the future and are ready to violate norms and take all they can in the here and now. Fear -- and ignorance -- destroy the

future by destroying human interest in and commitment to the future. Others, such as Col Dr. Max Manwaring, have written ably on how critical it is for governments to retain legitimacy, see his still hugely important edited work, *The Search for Security: A U.S. Grand Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*. I am charmed throughout by many turns of phrase, but one of the most impressive for me is that organization is a PROCESS not an institution, and that the best processes are those that optimize collective information-sharing, collective decision-making, so as to achieve collective benefits. I put the book down with four powerful take-aways:

- 01 Starting point for understanding any governance challenge is with the resource itself -- the Earth itself. If you fail to exercise due diligence and earnestly collect, process, and analyze all relevant information about that resource, the rate at which it is being drawn down, and all possible causes and effects, then you are destined to get it wrong.
- 02 When due diligence IS done, the general trend is to achieve the SHOCKING discovery that the resource is being overdrawn by 200% -- instead of a sustainable 100%, the draw, on water, for example, is 300%. Establishing this fact and sharing the information broadly is the single best thing that can be done in any situation.
- 03 In all success cases, stable long-term populations are vital and REPUTATION is a critical resource all by itself. What this means is that the current failed state environment where elite looting of commonwealths is all too common and the "First World" states accept massive displacement of populations as part of the cost of enabling predatory corporate looting of resources, is in fact counter-productive all around. We are killing a part of the Golden Goose when we sever the century-long ties of a population grounded in specific climes and places. See also Philip Alcott's brilliant *The Health of Nations: Society and Law beyond the State*. The author speaks of "human artisanship" as a major resource, I join that with reputation and individual human abilities to think and observe and think forward.
- 04 TIME MATTERS. The sooner you can get the truth on the table for all to see, the lower the cost of remediation once consensus is achieved, the sooner you can get sustainable practices established. The book ends with the author concluding that all the prevailing modes (in 1990 but I would say also today in 2014) "have the perverse effect of supporting increased centralization of political authority." Here are two books on why centralization -- and the corruption that comes with it -- is so terribly wrong: *Griftopia: A Story of Bankers, Politicians, and the Most Audacious Power Grab in American History* *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025* And here are two books on public wisdom and sacred economics as an alternative: *Empowering Public Wisdom: A Practical Vision of Citizen-Led Politics (Manifesto Series)* *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition* This book merits a revival, only this time, with a forcing function that brings it to the attention of all those engaged in the battle for the soul of cyberspace. As a proponent myself for an

Autonomous Internet and Liberation Technology I have a natural bias -- I also have huge faith in the average individual citizen, and confidence in what Vaclav Havel calls "the power of the powerless." We are not powerless. We are ROOT. It's time we lived up to that glorious responsibility. Best wishes to all, Robert David STEELE Vivas INTELLIGENCE FOR EARTH: Clarity, Diversity, Integrity, & Sustainability (2010)

Overall, this is a great entry by Elinor Ostrom. She gives relevant background stories and information about the issue of "The Commons". Ostrom's main idea is that a blend of a private property regime and state/government approach is the best way to govern the commons and prevent over-withdrawal (i.e. over-fishing, etc). She stresses the importance of local knowledge in setting up systems and fostering trust between the governors and those who are governed. However, the state's use of scientific knowledge and its ability to enforce the boundaries efficiently and strictly are of significance as well. Unfortunately, the work suffers from a muddling of ideas. Ostrom argues against the separate two approaches as an attempt to portray her idea as a fair balance, but sometimes it's unclear why she discusses some points or uses some example. A good read if you have the time and can sift through schemes and organize them.

This is a fantastic book that dispels a lifetime of wrong notions about common resource issues. The only puzzling thing about the book is the incredible number of typos! I have never read a book containing so many problems with the editing. It makes following a complex argument that much more difficult when I have to try to interpret what every typo really means. You may want to try the other edition.

I am surprised that there's little review activity going on for this book, even though the author has won the "fake nobel" prize (i.e. the "price in memory of alfred nobel" for economy). Regardless of what one thinks about the fake nobel, the author is certainly someone whose achievements deserve recognition. This book is a pedagogical summary of the important work that she's done in relation to "Common Pool Resources". It is written in an accurate and scientific style that never falls into the jargon trap. This gives a vivid impression of the author as someone open minded and keeping her thinking clear and focused on the facts. After an introduction on her intentions and method, she presents the so called "tragedy of the commons" (and its close kin, the "prisoner's dilemma") as a situation where theoretical thinking sees central intervention as the only way to break the (self)destructive behaviour predicted and often observed: everyone tries to appropriate as much as

they can get away from common resources until those resources collapse and everyone becomes worse off. She then calls attention to several field situations where individuals have been able to organize themselves to avoid falling into this trap without external intervention. The situations described are as diverse as mountain terrain in Switzerland, irrigation land in Spain and the Philippines or even fisheries in Turkey. Ostrom provides a detailed description of the salient features of these institutions before highlighting the common ground and the differences. She points out that these examples have institutions that have been stable for a long time and that we're therefore unsure about the process through which the institutions themselves were created. She then turns to more recent examples of successful institutions managing CPR where information is available regarding the institutional development that led to the current situation. The key examples are water management institutions in California and a project to improve local irrigation communities in Sri Lanka. She finally contrasts successful institutions with failing ones, with a view to identify whether factors that may have been thought of as being factors of success may not actually be irrelevant. The overall message of the book is that it is possible for local communities to take care of themselves and to efficiently manage CPR. It is not easy though and certain type of government intervention actually makes the matter worse. Likewise privatization is also not a one size fits all solution. So she's basically highlighting the need to consider each situation on its own, without ideological glasses. She provides a framework to analyze each specific case, but certainly avoids over-generalization. The world needs more people like Ostrom, (i.e. lucid thinkers genuinely interested to understand what goes on). Too bad the typical social "scientist" seems to be more interested to bend the facts to fit to his theories and ideologies.

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