Raiding the "commons" DRAFT

Contributed by Chris Maser
27 February 2008

Note: this article is lacking the short one paragraph answer to Dmitry, and there's also Dmitry's unresolved concern about the essay's calling for population reduction as a "solution." (I must have missed that) After these elements are fixed then we can publish.

Then I say the Earth belongs to each generation during its course, fully and in its own right; no generation can contract debts greater than may be paid during the course of its own existence. " Thomas Jefferson "

Once upon a time, silence could be found throughout much of the world, especially in the high mountain snows of winter and in the great, still expanses of the world's deserts. Today, however, silence from the highest mountain to the depths of the deepest ocean is a rare and elusive part of the commons. In fact, the world has gotten so noisy, even beneath the ocean waves, that it's threatening the ability of many sea creatures to seek food, find mates, protect their young, and escape their predators. The effects of underwater noise can be likened to being trapped the center of an acoustics traffic jam, where the din comes simultaneously from all sides. In deep water, where marine animals rely on their sense of hearing, the noise is especially harmful.
Noise from supertankers and military sonar equipment scrambles the communication signals used by dolphins and whales, which causes them to abandon traditional breeding grounds and change direction during migration. Although international shipping produces the most underwater noise pollution, few regulations are in place to control it and the military seems to think itself immune to controls.

What, you might ask, is this "commons?" The commons is that part of the world and universe that is every person's birthright. There are two kinds of commons. Some are gifts of Nature, such as clean air, pure water, fertile soil, a rainbow, northern lights, a beautiful sunset, or a tree growing in the middle of a village; others are the collective product of human creativity, such as the town well from which everyone draws water.

Scattered throughout various parts of the world there still exists a tree in the middle of the square around which village life revolves. It's a quaint meeting place in which neighbors form bonds with one another, children play games, women visit about the affairs of life, and men discuss work and politics. It's a place where old and young mingle in a way that bridges the generations in the flow and ebb of village life. It's a place where children still experience an unstructured and noncompetitive setting in which their parents are close at hand. As such, a village commons is far more than simply a public space around a tree. It's the center in which the life of true community blossoms because it has the scale of a human face.

Yet most Western economists would regard the village tree as a pathetic symbol of an "underdeveloped" country. The tree would therefore be cut down, the site where it grew would be "developed," and money would be charged in an attempt to provide what the tree did. In other words, the tree and all it freely offered to village life would be turned into commodities and sold for a price, which to economists is "growth" and "progress."

The commons is the "hidden economy, everywhere present but rarely noticed," writes author Jonathan Rowe. It provides the basic ecological and social support systems of life and well-being. It's the vast realm of our shared heritage, which we typically use free of toll or price. Air, water, and soil; sunlight and warmth; wind and stars; mountains and oceans; languages and cultures; knowledge and wisdom; peace and quiet; sharing and community; joy and sorrow; and the genetic building blocks of life these are all aspects of the commons.

A commons has an intrinsic quality of just being there, without formal rules of conduct. People are free to breathe the air, drink the water, and share life's experiences without a contract, without paying a royalty, without needing to ask permission.

A commons is simply waiting to be discovered and used. If a good swimming hole exists, people will find it. If a good view exists along a trail, hikers will stop and enjoy it. There is no need to advertise a commons; it will be found.

A commons engages people in the wholeness of themselves and in community. It fosters the most genuine of human emotions and stimulates interpersonal relationships in order to share the experience, which enhances its enjoyment and archives its memory.

We humans have jointly inherited the commons, which is more basic to our lives and well-being than either the market or the state. We are "temporary possessors and life renters," wrote British economist and philosopher Edmund Burke, and we "should not think it amongst [our] rights to cut off the entail, or commit waste on the inheritance."

Despite the wisdom of Burke's admonishment, the commons is today almost everywhere under assault, abuse, and degradation in the name of economic development as corporations are increasingly hijacking (euphemistically termed

"privatizing") both Nature's services and every creature's birthright to those services. Pollution despoils the air, defiles the soil, and poisons the water. Noise has routed silence from its most protected sanctuaries. City lights hide the stars by night. Urban sprawl, the disintegration of community, and the attempts to control, engineer, and patent the very substance of life itself are all part or the economic raid on the commons for private monetary gain. "Corporations," says author David Korten, "are pushing hard to establish property rights over ever more of the commons for their own exclusive ends, often claiming the right to pollute or destroy the regenerative systems of the Earth for quick gain, shrinking the resource base available for ordinary people to use in their pursuit of livelihoods, and limiting the prospects of future generations."

This is not to say that all corporations are bad or that the market is inept. It is to say that both corporations and the market must have boundaries to keep them within the realm of sustainable biophysical principles, human competence, and moral limits. "The market economy is not everything," asserted conservative economist Wilhelm Ropke in the 1950s. "The supporters of the market economy do it the worst service by not observing its limits." And it is by ignoring the moral limits of the market economy that we, the adults of the world, create poverty and increasingly mortgage all the generations of the future beginning with our own children and grandchildren.

"The supreme reality of our time is the vulnerability of our planet." President John F. Kennedy, 1963

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One of our voluntary editor's Dmitry Orlov asked, after reading Chris Maser's essay,
"Are market participants even theoretically able to pay heed to its limits, while remaining its participants? If so, how? Would they not be out-competed?"

Chris responded, "

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Chris's essay is condensed from his 2004 book The Perpetual Consequences of Fear and Violence: Rethinking the Future. Maisonneuve Press, Washington, D.C. 373 pp.

Chris has written several books that are showcased on his website, chrismaser.com. Chris lives in Corvallis, Oregon. He is a consultant on environmental land-use development, sustainable communities and forestry.

Further Reading: