CELEBRATING THE COMMONS

People, Ideas, and Stories for a New Year

On the Commons

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Why Should We Care About the Commons in the Modern World?

It matters more than ever in the age of the Internet and a global economy

Although it is a centuries-old way of life, the commons remains essential to our survival and happiness—even in the advanced industrial world.

The natural commons makes life itself possible thanks to air, water, biodiversity and DNA. The cultural commons makes human civilization possible through the sharing of knowledge, language, inventions, stories and art. The social commons makes our modern way of life possible through educational institutions, medical expertise, engineering know-how and communications tools.

Our democratic and community institutions are based on the principles of participatory citizenship embodied in the commons. Even the market economy depends on the commons for the natural resources and human capital that drive its profits, as well as the legal and regulatory systems without which it would fall apart.

Unfortunately, the commons today is under assault. The natural environment continues to suffer devastation, including the specter of global climate disruption. Privatization policies fence us out of resources that once could be useful to everyone, and budget-squeezed governments and civic institutions scale back on services upon which we depend. Open access to the Internet is being threatened.

Meanwhile many people are convinced their security and well-being depend entirely on what they can possess individually, to the detriment of the common good.

But the good news is that people everywhere are standing up to protect and promote what we all share. Some people—inspired by the work of Nobel Prize economics winner Elinor Ostrom, the practices of in-
digenous and peasant communities or other examples of the commons around us—are launching a movement to draw attention all the ways that the spirit and practice of the commons can help us solve the pressing problems of our time: economic inequity, environmental decline, social fragmentation, political alienation.

Many other people are not familiar with the term, but continue to roll up their sleeves to do crucial work in their communities, guided by a vision of the common good. They are commoners, too.

At this critical historical moment, the commons vision of a society where “we” matters as much as “me”.

—JAY WALLJASPER
10 Top Things You May Not Realize Belong to You

...and everyone else on the planet

1. Air and Water
2. Parks, Libraries, Streets and Sidewalks
3. Social Security, the National Weather Service, Police Protection and other Public Services
4. Wilderness Preserves and National Forests
5. Wikipedia and Open Source Software
6. Dance Steps and Fashion Trends
7. Biodiversity
9. Blood Banks, Soup Kitchens, 12-Step Groups, Museums and other Civic Initiatives
10. The Oceans, Antarctica and Outer Space
A Grassroots Group Stands Up for Everyone’s Water Rights

The Detroit People’s Water Board champions the Great Lakes Commons

The Detroit People’s Water Board isn’t waiting for someone else to solve Detroit’s water problems. This community coalition is taking an out-front role on everything from fighting water shutoffs and privatization schemes to helping create a watershed plan for the region.

“Our name is a powerful statement,” says Priscilla Dziubek, a representative on the Board from the East Michigan Environmental Action Council. “People get that we are grassroots and we believe we have a rightful say in what happens with our water.”

Charity Hicks, one of the founders of this grassroots organization to protect Detroit’s water for everyone. Photo by Bunker Seyfert.
The Detroit People’s Water Board (DPWB) is at the forefront of emerging efforts in the Great Lakes region to reclaim the water commons. It was born when community organizers saw the need to bridge a number of different water issues in the city—protecting low-income residents’ access to affordable water, preventing pollution and working to keep Detroit’s water publicly managed and accountable.

“We focus on the question: what does water mean for all of us?” explains Charity Hicks, another founding member, from the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. “The Board has a cross pollinating effect among people focused on poverty, health, growing food, jobs, ecological survival. We attend to both human and ecological sustainability.”

DPWB seeks to weave together social justice, citizen democracy and ecological health. The foundation for their work is fostering community and a deepened sense of the “we”—encompassing shared responsibility and equitable benefit.

People’s Water Board members could see that people were concerned about their own water, but they weren’t necessarily making a political connection. “Why in a water-blessed region are so many families’ shut off? Why would we turn over something so intrinsic to our public quality of life, our water, to private interests?” questions Hicks, alluding to the Board’s work to reconnect people to their water and to the community’s stake in what is happening. “We need to have a dialogue about those things we hold in common.”

Seeing the water as a commons, as “all of ours,” Hicks and Dzuibek agree, empowers people. They can make a difference in water issues, and in a bigger way in how we will live together and on this earth, Hicks observes. “We are saying: you are part of this conversation, you are an expert, we are all experts. We have full agency. This is what democracy looks like.”
A Crucial Part of the Human Story That Must Be Recaptured

*Bill McKibben looks to the commons as the solution to global climate disruption*

I’ve spent most of my life as a writer—and one of the sweetest parts of that job is knowing that whatever I produce ends up in a library, an institution dedicated to the idea that we can share things easily. There are innumerable other examples of sharing all around—and they are the parts of our lives that we usually care most about. They don’t show up on balance sheets because they’re not producing profit—but they are producing satisfaction.

These things we share are called commons, which simply means they belong to all of us. Commons can be gifts of nature—such as fresh water, wilderness and the airwaves—or the products of social ingenuity like the Internet, parks, artistic traditions, or the public health service.
But today much of our common wealth is under threat from those hungry to ruin it or take it over for selfish, private purposes.

The most crucial commons, perhaps, is the one now under greatest siege, and it poses a test of whether we can pull together to solve our deepest problems or succumb to disaster. Our atmosphere has been de facto privatized for a long time now—we’ve allowed coal, oil and gas interests to own the sky, filling it with the carbon that is the inevitable byproduct of their business. For a couple of centuries this seemed mostly harmless—Co2 didn’t seem to be causing much trouble. But two decades ago we started to understand the effects of global warming, and now each month the big scientific journals bring us new proof of just how vast the damage is: the Arctic is melting, Australia is on fire, the pH of the ocean is dropping fast.

If we are to somehow ward off the coming catastrophes, we have to reclaim this atmospheric commons. We have to figure out how to cooperatively own and protect the single most important feature of the planet we inhabit—the thin envelope of atmosphere that makes our lives possible. Wrestling this key prize away from Exxon Mobil and other corporations is the great political issue of our time, and some of the solutions proposed have been ingenious—most notably the idea put forth by commons theorist Peter Barnes and others that we should own the sky jointly, and share in the profits realized by leasing its storage space to the fossil fuel industry. For that to work, of course, we would have to reduce that storage space quickly and dramatically. Barnes’ Cap-and-Dividend plan offers one way to make that economically and politically feasible.

But for this and other necessary projects to succeed, we need first to break the intellectual spell under which we live. The last few decades have been dominated by the premise that if we privatize all economic resources it will produce endless riches. Which was kind of true, except that the riches went to only a few people. And in the process they melted the Arctic, as well as dramatically increasing inequality around the world. The commons is a crucial part of the human story that must be recovered if we are to deal with the problems now crowding in on us. This story is equal parts enlightening and encouraging, and it is entirely necessary for us to hear it.

—BILL MCKIBBEN
FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO ALL THAT WE SHARE: A FIELD GUIDE TO THE COMMONS
Nine Core Principles of the Commons

How to ensure the survival of our commons and communities

To create a commons-based society people need more than exposure to new ideas; they need tangible ways of experiencing, practicing and living out these bright possibilities. We must create new customs, understandings, systems, and structures.

1. We all belong to our community, and we each have an equal stake in what happens.

2. We must recognize and repair the damage that has been done, and the inequities that have been created by our current market-based society.

3. The things that belong to all of us must be named, claimed, defended, protected, and improved. We have a mutual responsibility to take care of these commons and pass them on to the next generation in better shape than we found them.

4. We must honor our full humanity. We are not merely individuals and consumers—we are neighbors, community members, citizens, and experts on the places we live.

5. We are surrounded by abundance and opportunity that the market system does not recognize or value. We must see and claim this abundance for the benefit of all.
6. Everyone should have the chance to participate in defining, restoring, creating, managing, leading, governing, and owning anything that is important to the future of the community.

7. People affected by critical decisions must be included in the process of making them.

8. History, cultural distinctiveness and people's personal stories are important factors in setting goals and making decisions, as well as simply understanding our community.

9. Sufficiency and resilience are keys to the future, representing the 180-degree opposite of the growth-driven market society we now experience.

—THE ON THE COMMONS TEAM
Annie Leonard is one of the most articulate, effective champions of the commons today. Her webfilm The Story of Stuff has been seen more than 15 million times by viewers. She also adapted it into a book.

Drawing on her experience investigating and organizing on environmental health and justice issues in more than 40 countries, Leonard says she’s “made it her life’s calling to blow the whistle on important issues plaguing our world.” On the Commons recently asked Leonard a few questions about the commons.

How did you first learn about the commons?

I first learned about the commons as a kid using parks and libraries. I didn’t assign the label “commons” to them, but I understood early on that some things belong to all of us and these shared assets enhance our lives and rely on our care.

Like many other college students, my first introduction to the word “commons” was sadly in conjunction with the word “sheep” and “tragedy.” That lousy resource management class tainted the word for me for years, until I heard Ralph Nader address a group of college students. He asked them to yell out a list of everything they own. This being the pre-i-gadget 1980’s, the list included “Sony Walkman...boombox...books...bicycle...clothes...bank account.” When the lists started to peter out, Ralph asked about National Parks and public airwaves. A light went off in each of our heads, and a whole new list was shouted out: rivers, libraries, the Smithsonian, monuments. That’s when I realized that the commons isn’t an overgrazed pasture; it really is all that we share.
What do you see as the biggest obstacle to creating a commons-based society right now?

There are so many interrelated aspects of our current economic and social systems which undermine the commons. Some obstacles are structural, like government spending priorities that elevate military spending and oil company subsidies over maintenance of parks and libraries. Others are social, including the erosion in social fabric and community-based lifestyles. Actually, even those have structural drivers; for example, land use planning which eliminates sidewalks and requires long commutes to work contribute to breakdown of social commons by impeding social interactions. It’s all so interconnected!
A huge obstacle is the shift toward greater privatization and commodification of physical and social assets. Many things that used to be shared—from open spaces for recreation to support systems to help a neighbor in need—have been privatized and commodified; they’ve been moved out of the community into the market place. This triggers a downward spiral. Once things become privatized, or un-commoned, we no longer have access to them without paying a fee. We then have to work longer hours to pay for all these things which used to be freely available—everything from safe afterschool recreation for kids to clean water to swim in to someone to talk to when you’re feeling blue. And since we’re working longer hours and spending more time alone, we have less time to contribute to the commons to rebuild these assets: less volunteer hours, less beach-clean-up days, less time for civic engagement to advocate for policies that protect the commons, less time to invite a neighbor over for tea. And on it goes.

What is the greatest opportunity to strengthen and expand the commons right now?

In spite of real obstacles, we have a lot on our side as we advance a commons-based agenda. First, we have no choice. There’s a very real ecological imperative weighing down on us. Even if we wanted to continue this overconsumptive, hyper individualistic and vastly unequal way of living, we simply can’t. We have to learn to share more and waste less, to find joy and meaning in shared assets and experiences rather than in private accumulation, to work together for a better world, rather than to build bigger walls around those who can. And the good news is that these changes not only will enable us to continue to live on this planet, but they will result in a happier, healthier society overall.

There’s another shift emerging which offers some real opportunities for building support for the commons. People in the overconsuming parts of the world are getting fed up with the burden of trying to own everything individually. We used to own our stuff and increasingly our stuff owns us. We work extra hours to buy more stuff, we spend our weekends sorting our stuff. We’re constantly needing to upgrade, repair, untangle, recharge, even pay to store our stuff. It’s exhausting.

The shift I see emerging is from an acquisition focused relationship to stuff, to an access-focused relationship. In the acquisition framework, the more stuff we had, the better, as captured in the 1990s bumpersticker “He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins.” Having spent a couple de-
decades being slaves to our stuff, we are rethinking. Now it is “He Who dies with the Most Toys Wasted His Life Working to Buy Them and Lived in a Cluttered House When He Could have been Investing in Community with which to Share Toys.”

Increasingly people want access to stuff, not all the burden that comes with ownership. Instead of owning a car and dealing with all that comes with it, we get one just when we want through city car share programs. Instead of hiring a plumber, we swap music lessons with one through skillsharing networks. Why buy something to own alone, when we can share it with others? Why signup for an even more crushing mortgage for a house with a big back yard, when we can instead share public parks? From coast to coast, there’s a resurgence of sharing, so much that it even has a fancy new name: collaborative consumption. I’m really excited about this. A whole new generation of people is realizing that access to shared stuff is easier on one’s budget and on the planet, then individual ownership. Now, that’s liberating.

—JAY WALLJASPER
Why I Call Myself a Commoner

A day in the life

Each day I walk out of my Minneapolis house into an atmosphere protected from pollution by the Clean Air Act. As I step onto a sidewalk that was built with tax dollars for everyone, my spirits are lifted by the beauty of my neighbors' boulevard gardens. Trees planted by people who would never sit under them shade my walk. I listen to public radio, a nonprofit service broadcast over airwaves belonging to us all, as I stroll around a lake in the park, which was protected from shoreline development by civic-minded citizens in the nineteenth century.

The park, like everything else I have mentioned so far, is a commons for which each of us is responsible.

Frequently I visit the public library, where the intellectual, cultural, scientific, and informational storehouse of the world is opened to me for free—and to anyone who walks through the door. My work requires me to constantly keep up with new knowledge. My best tool is the Internet. The library and Internet, too, are commons.

Returning home I stop at the farmer's market, a public institution created by local producers who want to share their fare. The same spirit prevails at our local food co-op, of which I am the owner (along with thousands of others), and at community-run theaters and civic events. These commons-based institutions provide us with essential services, the most important of which is fun. Living in the commons isn't only about cultural and economic wealth; it's also about joy.
Candido Grzybowski, the Brazilian sociologist who co-founded the World Social Forum, advises, “If we want to work for justice, we should work for the commons.” Protecting and restoring precious gifts from nature and from our foreparents for future generations is one the greatest privileges of a being a commoner.

—HARRIET BARLOW
CO-FOUNDER OF ON THE COMMONS
AND FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE BLUE MOUNTAIN CENTER
What is Commoning, Anyway?

It’s a way of activating the power of social cooperation to get things done—and bring us together

The term “commoning” has been popularized by historian Peter Linebaugh, whose book The Magna Carta Manifesto shows that the founding document of Anglo-American democracy repeatedly affirms people’s right to use the commons to fulfill their basic needs. A majority of English people, known as “commoners,” derived at least part of their livelihoods from the commons before the brutal onset of enclosures by wealthy landowners. Hence the word “commoning” describes people living in close connection to the commons.”

The word commoning, then, brings to life the essential social element of the commons. The act of commoning draws on a network or relationships made under the expectation that we will each take care of one another and with a shared understanding that some things belong to all of us—which is the essence of the commons itself. The practice of commoning demonstrates a shift in thinking from the prevailing ethic of “you’re on your own” to “we’re in this together.”

People who have come together to co-create and co-produce the world they want to see are at the heart of this trend. They need not wait for someone else to undertake the work required to solve our problems. More people are beginning to look around their neighborhoods and say “Well, no one is using that vacant lot, we could plant a community gar-
den there,” or “I think we can solve this neighborhood problem if a bunch of people pitch in to help.”

Commoning represents a new way for everyday citizens to make decisions and take action to shape the future of their communities without being locked into the profit-driven mechanics of the market or being solely dependent on government agencies for funding. However, most folks who make these kinds of decisions probably don’t call their actions “commoning”; instead they may simply think of their actions as “common sense.”

Commoning has always been done. It’s a way of life that involves taking your life into your own hands, rather than depending solely on outside forces to sell you what you need or to provide a pre-scripted path forward. It’s a way to resist the dominant paradigm of modern life, which insists that what’s bought and sold in the market economy is the only way to provide fundamental meaning and sustenance in our lives.

—JULIE RISTAU
Be a Commoner

Five ways to boost the commons all around you

1. Challenge the prevailing myth that all problems have private, individualized solutions. Collaborating with others is more likely to meet your needs for security and happiness than extra money or further possessions.

2. Notice how many of life’s pleasures exist outside the marketplace—playing ball, exploring online, watching a sunset, cooking a favorite recipe, carrying on a tradition, playing music, hanging out with friends.
3. **Conduct an inventory of commons in your community.** These are places, resources and social practices open to everyone. Publicize your findings, and offer suggestions for celebrating and improving these community assets at the same time as making sure they’re available to everyone.

4. **Watch where your money goes.** How do the stores, companies and financial institutions you patronize help or hinder the commons? Buy from local, independent businesses or cooperatives that share your values whenever possible. Investigate how stuff you now pay for could be acquired in cooperative ways, ranging from barter to carsharing to community gardens to the public library.

5. **Think of yourself as a commoner and share your enthusiasm.** Raise the subject in conversation, classes, church, on-line and the other networks you are involved in. Support causes and movements to protect what we share together.

—JAY WALLJASPER
With equal parts poise and resolution, May Boeve fights climate change. Alongside author Bill McKibben and a group of college friends, she spearheaded a campaign called Step It Up in 2007 that organized creative actions across the U.S. and urged political leaders to cut carbon 80% by 2050. The campaign then went international under the name 350.org.

350.org “works hard to organize in a new way—everywhere at once, using online tools to facilitate strategic offline action.” You may have seen aerial shots of the human-made 350’s (the number that stands for the safe level of carbon in the atmosphere), or the climate street art, just two of the many ways 350.org’s organizing efforts have united individuals from around the globe in common cause.

Boeve emphasizes that the climate crisis requires us all to step up as a global community, and, today, 350.org’s initiatives are led by thousands of volunteer organizers in over 188 countries.

I recently had the opportunity to catch up with Boeve about how the commons connects to the growing global movement against climate change, 350.org’s stance against the fossil fuel industry, and the importance of the commons in her own life.

Boeve calls herself a commoner because she wants “to be part of a movement that’s trying to create something different than what we stand to inherit right now.”
How does the commons influence your work at 350.org?

The way we try to organize at 350.org has been a commons exercise, specifically through the distributed days of action we've held five different times. These days are all about bringing communities together on a particular day, with a particular theme, to deliver a message about preserving the climate, which is a global commons. People participate because they understand that their actions link them in a very direct way to thousands of individuals around the world. It’s an experiment in demonstrating how the sum is greater than its individual parts.

When I read Bill McKibben’s piece in Rolling Stone called Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math, I was intrigued by his belief that moral outrage might be what sparks a transformative challenge to fossil fuel. How does 350.org help people see the immorality of the fossil-fuel industry’s actions?

We all know that burning fossil fuels drives the climate to change and warm. That’s not news. It’s not news that the public attitude toward oil industry executives is largely negative. And we all know that those execs are the characters behind the drilling—that’s not news either. But what is new is the link: we have to make it clear that these executives are knowingly taking actions that will make it impossible for the rest of us, including future generations, to live on a healthy planet.

How do we connect the moral aspect? Our particular style of work is to influence public perception through action and global organizing. We find stories and examples of people who are challenging the system, who are seeing things in a new way, and in doing so, are changing the way the public at large understands this problem. Not as a problem about your individual actions and the car you drive and where you buy your food—which all still matters—but that this problem involves a set of actors who are making bad choices and are not being held accountable by our political system.

We must fundamentally change the way the public views the oil industry. Take the apartheid struggle: at a certain point, you had to choose which side you were on, whether you agreed that racial segregation was immoral, or whether you did not. That’s where we are right now with the oil industry.
What do you see as the biggest obstacle to fighting for, and protecting, the climate as a commons?

I think a huge obstacle to building this movement, second only to our opposition, is the ability for any one person to see that he or she can do something about the problem—because it’s really big. Another obstacle is the inspiration factor. How do we inspire people to spend their most valuable resource (their time) working to bring about a solution to climate change? It’s a challenge in an era when there are so many problems, many of which stem from undervaluing the commons. But there are many people doing impressive work for the greater good. In their work I see incredible promise, and that’s what keeps me inspired to work on climate change issues.

At 350.org, specifically, we’ve embraced social media tools as mass storytelling platforms from the beginning, and we’ve had a lot of incredible experiences. When we receive stories via email, we often write back and say, “Hey, we’re inspired by this, and we bet our Facebook followers will be too. Can we post this on our page?” Hundreds of thousands of people “Like” and “Share” the stories we post about individuals from all over the globe who are tackling seemingly insurmountable challenges for their communities.

There’s one specific example that comes to mind. A young woman from Baghdad participated in our first day of action all by herself, because her friends were afraid to cross a security checkpoint. The image of this woman standing alone with her 350 banner rose above the rest, and she wrote us a few months later to report that she had formed a local climate organizing group. The following year we hosted another day of action, and lo and behold, there she was with a group of ten. To me, and I think to many people, these stories show why it’s imperative that we work on climate change as a global community. There’s something special about knowing you’re taking the same action as someone else on the opposite side of the globe. Together we can stand as a peaceful army fighting for a different future.

—JESSICA CONRAD
(South Bend, Indiana) August 3, 2035. Just a few years ago, the sight of downtown streets in South Bend thronged with shoppers, office workers and entertainment seekers would have been shocking. Once upon a time you could shoot a cannon down South Bend’s Main Street at 8 p.m. with little risk of casualties. But downtown is now bustling with people day and night, many who come not to work or shop but to be where the action is.

Over the past five years, 6,800 new housing units have been built in the area, along with a spate of new offices, restaurants, bars, stores, theaters and galleries. South Bend’s newly completed downtown farmer’s market complex draws tens of thousands of visitors each day, and LaFayette Street is referred to as the “Wall Street of Credit Unions,” with more than a dozen cooperatively owned financial institutions headquartered.
along a three-block stretch. One of these, the Mondragon American Trust (MAT), which popularized the concept of transforming suburban subdivisions into eco-villages, is now larger than all but two Wall Street banks.

As much as anywhere in the United States, South Bend has prospered by capitalizing on the promise of the commons—which means assets belonging to all of us, from water and wilderness to the Internet and cultural treasures. The commons also refers to a new ethic of sharing and cooperation, which has come to influence decision making at all levels in South Bend, bringing big changes to city hall, business offices and neighborhood groups.

While the ideas of the commons sound theoretical and abstract, commons-based policies show practical results. The South Bend unemployment rate hovers below 1 percent, and the city ranks high for the quality of its municipal services and the strength of its civic organizations. Because such a sizable share of economic activity rests in the hands of locally owned businesses and cooperatives, South Bend’s new wealth is spread around the community, not piped to a corporate headquarters far away.

High school graduation rates are the highest ever in the city’s history, with 93 percent of students going on to college or technical training programs. The St. Joseph River and local lakes are clean enough for fishing and swimming. Three light rail lines, coupled with policies to promote bicycling and pedestrian-friendly neighborhood businesses, give the once-gritty city an almost Parisian quality of urban charm.

“I don’t know of another place that has done a more thorough job of bringing government, community groups, non-profit institutions and private business together to solve pressing problems and make sure that future generations enjoy the bounty of the commons in their daily lives,” declares Salaam Sanchez, director of the prestigious E.F. Schumacher School of Business at the University of Puerto Rico. “South Bend is pointing us in the direction of a sustainable, prosperous and—dare I say—pleasurable future.”

While South Bend has accomplished the most of any American community in promoting a vision of the commons—thanks to the enthusiastic work of citizens coming out of neighborhood organizations, social movements, labor unions, the business community and religious congregations—you see similar policies being put into action everywhere
from Bangor to Berkeley, Ottawa to Oaxaca.

Nearby Gary, Indiana—once an economic basket case in anyone's eyes—is now thriving as the center of the revived Lake Michigan fishing industry. Hard-hit Buffalo, New York, flourishes as the home of world-renowned green engineering firms. Even after the closing of its military bases, San Antonio is booming thanks to its emergence as a music and media capital known as the “Tex-Mex Hollywood.”

Probably the greatest impact of the commons all over the world has come in the flowering of community and civic organizations dedicated to improving people's lives. Kieran Chang, best-selling self-help author “From the rise of shared-family housing to the teen service corps and the creation of new neighborhood plazas in almost every town, the commons brightens our lives from morning to midnight. It amounts to a spectacular shift from 'me' to 'we'.”

Indeed, the daily rhythm of modern society has evolved dramatically since the harried days when demands of the market economy drove almost every aspect of life. “The long working hours, financial anxiety and lack of time for family, fun, friends and faith seem like a bad dream now,” Chang offers. “The rediscovery of the commons prompted people to think more about what really mattered to them.”

The spirit of the commons is on full display here at the Common Wealth Festival in South Bend, which opened last night. At the TED (technology/entertainment/design) Bazaar, folks are urged to download the latest movies, music, blogs, software, greenware, smartware, slowware, poetry, architectural codes, news reports, video mash-ups, engineering specs, gaming templates, typography, and fashion designs from everywhere across the planet. At the same time, festival-goers can sample 75 different beers, 19 wines, 13 bourbons, 31 vinegars, 116 cheeses, 56 different kinds of sausage and eight varieties of West African-style cassava brew, all made right inside the city limits.

“South Bend is the center of the universe—to those of us who live here,” exclaims Mayor Lakeshia Kluzynski, who admits to liking the Polish sausages best. “That's the great gift of the commons—letting us discover the wonderful things around us that we all share.”

—JAY WALLJASPER
The Commons Framework

A framework for what goes around and comes back

I. Center of the Circle: These core principles characterize all commons-based initiatives and any vital commons.

Equity: Everyone has a fair and just share of our commons to expand opportunities for all.

Sustainability: Our common wealth must be cared for so that it can sustain all living beings, including future generations.
Interdependence: Cooperation and connection in our communities, around the world and with our living planet is essential for the future.

II. Second Ring of the Circle: New ways of life arise when our communities and society as a whole become more rooted in the practice of the commons.

Shared Governance: Everyone is engaged in gathering information, making decisions and exercising power to steward common resources.

Deepened Responsibility: Together we claim the power to repair inequity, restore our common inheritance and expand opportunities for human fulfillment and planetary resilience.

Belonging: A more expansive view of belonging fosters broader understandings of what ownership means and new structures for how it works.

Co-Creating: A spirit of common purpose lets us realize that abundance, not scarcity, prevails when we invite wider participation in our endeavors.

III. Outer Ring of the Circle: Commons exist—what we inherit and create together.

—THE ON THE COMMONS TEAM
The Great Lakes, of course, are already a commons—something shared by many and owned by none. But can a commons truly be a commons if not recognized in law, public policy and the minds of the public at large? This was a central inquiry at the Great Lakes Commons Gathering, held at the University of Notre Dame last fall, which sparked exploration about how to activate people in various arenas to work for the recognition of the lakes as living commons.

One form of governance for the Great Lakes could be the creation of a social charter.

Social charters are a tool commoners have long used to protect themselves from destruction or enclosure of their commons. When people in 13th Century England found their commons lands under threat by the monarch, they drafted the Charter of the Forest alongside the Magna Carta to protect what belonged to all. In South Africa, the South African Freedom Charter ratified by the Congress of the People in 1955 articulated a just vision for the country and unified resistance to the oppression and exploitation of apartheid.

A social charter process will do two vital things toward the establishment of a Great Lakes Commons. First, it will help activate commoners to see they have a rightful, in fact critical, role in establishing the vision and principles that can reshape governance of the Great Lakes. Secondly, by engaging people about what those principles ought to be, it will invite a sense of responsibility and stewardship in what happens to the water.

Today, the average person thinks little about their relationship to the waters or their responsibility for them. And yet there is a deep love of the Lakes that evident among the people of the region, but rarely is tapped politically or socially. That’s why we are embarking on a social charter creation process to renew, rediscover and reinvent a stewardship rela-
tionship and culture around the Lakes. Beyond the importance of the charter itself, the audacity and clarity of calls for a social charter will break through the status quo and galvanize people around a new possibility.

All of us realize that we need to deepen and expand our knowledge of each other if we are to forge a life sustaining future for our Great Lakes. But it is not easy to connect given the history between the region’s people—Native and settler, urban and rural, descendents of African, European and First Nations peoples. When a commons has been lost, taken or forgotten, our first task is reweaving the web of relationships and understandings. In our days together at Great Lakes Commons gathering we worked to build, recover and recreate the knowledge and connections that will enable us to act together—it marked the beginning of a truer spirit of “we” for the Great Lakes commons that extends hope for the path forward.

—ON THE COMMONS TEAM
Although new to us, the commons is actually a very old idea that has continually influenced human progress. It remains a central organizing principle of indigenous peoples, peasant communities and advanced industrial nations. Social democracy, as practiced in Europe and other places, embodies a basic commons principle—that no one should be denied basic needs like food, housing, health care, day care, education, transportation, job training, paid vacation, a comfortable old age and a measure of dignity in their lives.

American society has been grounded in commons since the beginning. “Nature’s gifts are the common property of the human race,” declared Thomas Paine. The Land Ordinance of 1785, drafted by a committee of the Continental Congress that included Thomas Jefferson, established a cooperative model for settlement of the West (and removal of Indian nations) by setting aside one square-mile section of every township as common property to be used to support a public school.

New Deal legislation, crowned by the Social Security Act, as well as the GI Bill drew upon a sense of the commons—the belief that we’re all in this together—to ease economic disadvantage and elevate millions of families into the middle class. In many cases, however, these benefits were denied to African Americans, a situation Ira Katznelson chronicles in his book When Affirmative Action Was White. Repairing the longstanding injustice done to African Americans, American Indians, Latinos and other excluded groups remains one of the central missions of commons activism today.

Although rarely articulated as a distinct philosophy, the ideals of the commons provided inspiration for key advancements throughout our
history—some by government programs and others by citizen initiatives, ranging from public health improvements to the labor and women's movements. All these success stories refute frequent claims that individualism alone accounts for America's progress.

—JAY WALLJASPER

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A Tragedy or Not a Tragedy?

Elinor Ostrom’s global research showed that commons work for everyone when they are properly managed

Everyday more and more people are realizing that many of the most important things in life belong to all of us. That’s the good news.

The bad news is that in this era of market absolutism, the commons itself is under threat like never before.

In some cases, what belongs to all of us is being privatized—stolen, really—for the benefit of a few. Since the 1980s, owners of radio and TV stations have had almost no responsibilities to the public interest in return for the fortunes they make on our public airwaves—a free ride now being sought by web providers who want to shred net neutrality rules that ensure everyone equal access to the Internet.

In other cases, the commons is simply neglected or nibbled away until it becomes less valuable to everyone—reinforcing the market mantra that you cannot depend on anything you don’t own yourself. Although this never made sense to Americans left behind by the economy, many middle-class people came to accept that logic over the past 30 years. Who cares that Social Security appears shaky and the recreation center at the park is falling down, when you can stash your cash in a 401K and buy into a private health club?
That’s all changed with the economic distress of the last five years. Suddenly what we share—parks, libraries, transit, public schools, a social safety net, a sense of community cooperation—has become increasingly important. Yet, ironically, at a time when demand for public and civic services is rising, sharp reductions in tax revenues and charitable giving mean they are being cut back or eliminated altogether.

It’s crazy that library hours are being slashed at a time when increasing numbers of people can’t afford private Internet service or new books. It’s ridiculous that transit fares are rising and routes being cut at a time when it’s harder than ever for some people to afford cars or gas, and when it’s clear that auto emissions are affecting the world’s climate. It’s criminal that programs helping the poor, both in government and the nonprofit sector, are struggling to find money when so many more people now depend on them.

This amounts to full-scale retreat from the greater good, which we can call “a tragedy of the commons.” Of course that’s the opposite of how this phrase is generally understood—that the commons itself is the tragedy, not its destruction or theft.

This negative view dates back to 1968 when wildlife biologist Garrett Hardin published “The Tragedy of the Commons,” a hugely influential essay in *Science* magazine where he speculated that collective ownership of resources was a major factor in environmental destruction. He described a hypothetical common pasture and argued that because no one owned it outright, no one has an incentive to take care of it, meaning that everyone will graze as many cattle as possible there until the land turns barren and worthless.

Zealous free market advocates seized on Hardin’s parable as proof that any system other than rigid private property leads to ruin. It took the work of the late political scientist Elinor Ostrom—co-winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics, the first woman so honored—to finally debunk the belief that commons inevitably lead to tragedy.

Ostrom’s field work in Kenya, Switzerland, Guatemala, Nepal, Turkey and Los Angeles shows that real people in real communities generally create rules and systems to protect the precious resources they share. These can be enforced by government regulation, local customs or other means to make sure that common property and livelihoods are protected. Other examples include the rules New England lobstermen developed through the years to prevent overfishing or irrigation systems
in New Mexico that have been successfully and fairly governed by community groups for four centuries.

Garrett Hardin eventually admitted that what he was talking about were unmanaged commons, not all forms of commons.

In situations when there is no governance of what belongs to all, the tragedy Hardin describes still goes on. We see this today in the collapse of ocean fish stocks, and the increase in greenhouse gases, which are disrupting our climate. This is because selfish national interests have stymied any international agreements to protect our global commons.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Photo of Elinor Ostrom courtesy of Augsburg College.
7 Reasons Why We Believe Land Is an Essential Commons

Even when privately owned, it must be stewarded for future generations

Here at On the Commons, we believe land is an essential commons. What follows is a list of beliefs that support that idea.

Land is not a commodity; human beings did not create it. Land is a gift given by the universe to us all.

In order for a restorative economy to emerge and for local economies to flourish, we must gradually transform our thinking and behavior toward land.
Viewed through the lens of the commons, all communities have a fundamental and equitable claim to our common inheritance of natural and created abundance, and they must also play a critical role in the stewardship of those resources.

When we buy and sell land we are really buying and selling certain rights of use to the land, rather than the land itself. And these rights are always balanced by responsibilities. Therefore, having the right to a certain piece of land should always come with an obligation to practice social, economic and environmental stewardship.

Land is a form of commons—something we all share the same as we do air, water, scientific knowledge, and the Internet. People can use these commons for their own livelihood, but cannot diminish them for future generations. When the interests of the earth and the community are prioritized, private property can be treated as a commons.

Food underlies every aspect of human activity and economy. It is, quite literally, the source of our health, sustenance and sustainability as a species. (See The Food Commons: Building a National Network of Localized Food Systems)

We live in a time of extraordinary opportunity. People are re-awakening to the fact that food is not only the basis of our health but it is also at the basis of traditions, customs and culture that bind us together as a family and community. (See The Food Commons: Building a National Network of Localized Food Systems)

—ON THE COMMONS TEAM

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But before we can redesign society, we must first learn to see the world as a commons.

**Thesis 01**
Some people see the world as a battleground, while others see it as a commons.

**Thesis 09**
Those who see the world as a battleground strive to suppress surprise from others. “Loose cannons” are dangerous.

**Thesis 10**
Those who see the world as a battleground revel in what they’ve made impossible for others. Those who see the world as a commons revel in what they have made possible with others.
Thesis 14
As in battle, as in a market economy: for every plus there must be a minus. This is the essence of profit.

Thesis 51
He who sees the world as a battleground requires an opponent. Lacking an opponent, he lacks an identity. And a future for his past.

If the previous centuries were about protecting the world from the tragedy of the commons, then this century will be about redesigning society to promote their triumph.

– LELAND MASCHMEYER

Excerpted from Triumph of the Commons: 55 Theses on the Future is a book written by Maschmeyer and illustrated by fifty-five international artists. A mix of philosophy and pop culture, this book reveals the philosophic DNA that makes the commons our most important cultural narrative. Leland’s aim is to vividly frame these key concepts and to provoke discussion about them. Triumph of the Commons: 55 Theses on the Future can be ordered on Amazon.com.

Leland Maschmeyer is an award winning creative director and author in New York City. Working in the fields of design and business innovation, he strives to infuse both disciplines—and their output—with the commons ethic. He speaks regularly at conferences, universities, and companies about the topic and its importance to businesses and culture.
The Re-Mix Master

*Hip Hop sound artist DJ Spooky fuses music from all over*

Paul Miller, a beret-wearing hip hop musician, is the living embodiment of collaboration. He performs and records as DJ Spooky (the name is taken from a character in William Burrough’s novel *Nova Express*). His CD remixes and deejay performances “steal” materials from every imaginable source—from Yoko Ono to Metallica to modern minimalist composer Steve Reich to Jamaican pop tunes of the ‘60s to D.W. Griffith’s movie “Birth of a Nation” to Pacific Island traditions.

But he has earned his eclecticism honestly. He travels constantly to music-making subcultures around the world, from indigenous people to electronic music undergrounds, from Antarctica to Angola to a New Year’s Eve party on the beaches of Rio—and then produces something “new.”
Miller deeply explores the philosophy and meaning of music sampling. This is reflected in the book *Sound Unbound*, an anthology of essays about music sampling by the likes of Sun Ra, Philip Glass, William Burroughs, and a few dozen others.

Miller points out the artificiality of “authorship” because in practice no one creates something entirely new. We are constantly borrowing from the past and from our peers, and then remixing it into something “new.” Why should the most recent individual “author” get all the credit for the work, as copyright law mandates?

Miller pointed out that societies that openly honor the re-use of works from the past are actually “keeping the past alive” through that re-use. New art becomes an ongoing conversation with our ancestors. By contrast, modern copyright-driven culture considers its past “dead,” which in a sense it is. We are impoverished by not being able to access the past freely and openly unless it is very old. Copyright terms are now the lifetime of an author plus seventy years.

(This fall DJ Spooky was a resident artist at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City.)

—DAVID BOLLIER
Protecting the Planet Starts With How We Think About the World

Life is more than a never-ending race to acquire more stuff and assert dominance over everything around us

In an era of rapid global warming and accelerated loss of biodiversity, protecting the Earth will take more than merely adjusting our actions—polluting less here, conserving more there, moving toward sustainability within the confines of today’s prevailing worldview.

To really save our planet, we must change how we think about the world itself and our place within it. This means taking a fresh look at nature, learning from its amazing rhythms, patterns and interconnections. And it means opening our selves up to new possibilities for how humans work together to survive, thrive and ensure good lives for coming generations.

A shift of this importance will not happen easily. It requires a fundamental reorganizing of our industrial, hierarchical, technocratic, economic-centric culture. And it will be ferociously opposed by those who reap fat profits from the way things are.

Yet we must remember that the modern industrial, market way of life—which is so deeply instilled in many people’s minds that they can’t imagine living any other way—actually benefits only a tiny sliver of the planet’s inhabitants. Certainly not plants and animals, nor people living in the global south, nor the poor and most of the middle-class in the overdeveloped world, nor people who love nature, nor those seeking meaning in their lives beyond buying and selling.

Most people envision their lives as something more than a never-ending race to accumulate more money, acquire more stuff, achieve more technical prowess and assert dominance over everything around us. Competitive instincts do not wholly define the human character—
we also possess deep urges to cooperate with one another and to appreciate the wonder of this world we call home.

That’s why I believe the global movement for the United Nations to adopt a **Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth** (modeled on the landmark Universal Declaration on Human Rights) is not a quixotic crusade. It only makes sense to move toward a different worldview that challenges the dictates of a globalized profit-crazed industrial system. But how? Well, the commons is a proven model of how we can relate more harmoniously with nature and each other that has been the organizing principle of many cultures through the centuries.

The commons represents an old way of looking at life that’s now being heralded as a bold new idea for solving the problems that face us. In essence, it’s an operating system for life on Earth that focuses on what we share, rather than on what we own individually. The commons still flourishes around the globe today, not only in indigenous and peasant societies where it is the foundation of daily life, but also in the heart of rich, technologically advanced nations.

We all need the gifts of air, water, soil, plants, animals, minerals and genes bestowed by Mother Earth. We all depend on the bounty of oceans, forests, skies, plains, rivers, prairies, wilderness and biodiversity. Without sharing these resources, and the many layers of collaboration they foster, modern society would not exist.

The commons puts useful tools in our hands to stop the assault on Mother Earth and start the healing of our planet. Restoring the commons and defending the rights of Mother Earth are really the same cause, which depends upon discovering a different vision of looking at and living in the world.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Credit: Tatoo: Nick Wasko from Sacred Heart; Photo: Melissa Dex Guzman under a Creative Commons license from flickr.com
This 17th century folk poem is one of the pithiest condemnations of the English enclosure movement—the process of fencing off common land and turning it into private property. In a few lines, the poem manages to criticize double standards, expose the artificial and controversial nature of property rights, and take a slap at the legitimacy of state power. And it does it all with humor, without jargon, and in rhyming couplets.

– James Boyle, Professor at Duke Law School

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose.

The law demands that we atone
When we take things we do not own
But leaves the lords and ladies fine
Who takes things that are yours and mine.

The poor and wretched don’t escape
If they conspire the law to break;
This must be so but they endure
Those who conspire to make the law.

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
And geese will still a common lack
Till they go and steal it back.
The Foundation of Commons-Based Solutions

Six elements of a new paradigm

1. We understand that everyone belongs—and everyone has a stake in any decisions made. No exceptions.

2. We act out of sufficiency (“there is enough”) and share a mutual responsibility to take care of this abundance and pass it on.

3. We value the humanity of everyone.

4. We seek a rough social equity in decision-making, outcomes and across society as a whole.

5. We take history into account—everyone’s history. Who we are, what we’ve experienced and where we come from.

6. We put structures, systems or rules in place to make sure everyone belongs and ensure continuity of this work into the future.

—THE ON THE COMMONS TEAM

Photo by Ben Strader.
“Common sense” is a term entrepreneur Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin uses with ever increasing enthusiasm to describe the local food initiative he is creating with immigrant Latino farmers in Minnesota.

“I come from the commons,” declares Haslett-Marroquin, who grew up in Guatemala, where his family still farms communal lands. “And I am going back to the commons.”

He is the co-founder of the fair trade Peace Coffee Company, and leads the Sustainable Food and Agriculture Program at the Minneapolis-based Main Street Project. In 2006 founded the Rural Enterprise Center in Northfield, Minnesota, which like many Midwestern communities has attracted growing numbers of Latin American immigrants.

In times of economic stagnation, many people worry that immigrants are taking jobs needed by native-born Americans. These fears are especially keen in small towns, where the impact of the continuing economic crisis hits hard. Haslett-Marroquin, however, sees an opportunity that can benefit both immigrants and the community as a whole.

He noticed that many people around Northfield were eager to eat more locally raised, healthy food but were unable to afford it or sometimes even find it. At the same time, he saw that Latino immigrants had lifelong experience as sustainable farmers but lacked the financial
means to take up farming. The solution was obvious. Find a way to get Latino farmers back on the land and connect them with consumers seeking wholesome food. This is exactly what Haslett-Marroquin did in launching a free-range poultry enterprise, market garden and family farmer training program, all designed to put good food on local dinner tables and income into the pockets of family farmers.

“Agripreneurship” is how Haslett-Marroquin describes this effort to revive family farming for local markets by taking advantage of immigrants’ first-hand knowledge of small-scale sustainable agriculture practices. “Commons sense,” he says, is another word for what he and his colleagues are doing.

This training center and enterprise are a shining example of an emerging idea known as commons-based development—a strategy that strengthens the commons by making sure that economic expansion projects help the community as a whole.

While commons work is often seen as an activist or community cause more than a business model, Hasslett-Marroquin’s projects embody fundamental commons principles: a commitment to future generations, a focus on sustaining the earth, and a means of providing a benefit to everyone.

As Haslett-Marroquin says, “the commons is a very straightforward common-sense approach to creating systems that sustain society and sustain life on the planet.”

—JAY WALLJASPER
Libertarians, the Tea Party and other so-called conservatives devoted to slashing all government spending not related to the military, prisons, the drug war and highways have an easy answer when asked what happens to people whose lives and livelihoods depend on public programs. They point to volunteerism—the tradition of people taking care of each other, which has sustained human civilization for millennia.

It’s a compelling idea, which evokes the spirit of the commons. Volunteers working largely outside the realm of government—neighborhood organizations, local fire brigades, blood banks and other civic initiatives—are obvious examples of commons-based sharing and caring.

So that means John Boehner, Ron Paul and Sean Hannity qualify as commoners, too, despite their adamant skepticism about Medicaid, environmental regulations and campaign finance limits?

Not so fast! Volunteerism never rises above a convenient smoke-screen, which right-of-center politicians use to justify shredding the
social safety net. Increased support for the people and institutions that help the poor and the sick, strengthen our communities, protect the environment and generally make America a kinder and gentler place (to quote the most ardent proponent of volunteerism, George H.W. Bush) never make the final cut in the right-wing blueprint for our future. They’re a lot of talk, and but little action when it comes to actually supporting the kind of cooperative efforts that make a better world.

Theoretically you could imagine a classical conservative model of a commons-based society based upon strong incentives for everyday citizens people to fill the void of services now provided by federal, state and local governments—everything from police protection to basic scientific research to the Public Health Service. But to actually create such a society, however, would mean some sweeping changes to current economic and social policies that today’s right-wing spokesmen would never tolerate.

To truly encourage widespread volunteerism, we’d need to make sure that everyone (not just the well-to-do) had the time to do it. Most people today, working longer hours for less pay, are frantic just to get through the day. Finding extra time in their crunched schedules to manage upkeep at the local park or take care of elderly neighbors looks impossible.

What it would take to make this happen would be a dramatically expanded vacation time, family-leave benefits and probably a four-day workweek—or at least stringent enforcement of overtime provisions for all people working more than 40 hours a week.

Even more important to brightening what George H.W. Bush called the thousand points of light would be a return to the days of the family wage—the period before the 1970s when a middle-class household could get by on one workers’ wages. And unlike the days before the 1970s, minorities and low-wage workers would not be excluded from this social contract. And since we live in a different social era now, it’s likely that many couples today would elect to both work half time. But any way you want to do it, this would trigger a volcanic eruption of volunteers. The place to start would be enacting a Canadian-style health care system and tripling the minimum wage right away.

I cannot imagine political leaders who call themselves conservative these days would stand for any of the ideas laid out in the previous two paragraphs—although some of the people who vote for them might, including evangelicals, traditionalist Catholics and “conservatives” who are actually in favor of preserving community values rather than sac-
rificing them in the name of exponentially expanding corporate profits.

Boehner, Michelle Bachmann and many Democrats, too, would recoil at these ideas because they shift the balance of power in society from the wealthy who finance their campaigns to the poor and middle-class who, in the famous words of Bill Clinton, “work hard and play by the rules.”

These pro-volunteer, pro-commons policies also depend on government playing an important role: Enforcing new vacation, family leave, work hours and minimum wage laws, as well as making sure everyone has adequate health care coverage and access.

Politicians and pundits on the right often accuse progressives of being naïve about human nature for not recognizing the true motives that drive people’s behavior. That’s debatable in light of new evidence from many fields that our cooperative instincts are stronger than our selfish ones.

But we certainly have a case of the pot calling the kettle black right here: Conservatives laud volunteerism as the best way to maintain our social fabric, yet they naively believe that this will happen with no provisions to stop unscrupulous employers from stealing so much of people’s time with low wages and stingy vacations policies that they have no time left over for the common good.

—JAY WALLJASPER

Photo by Adam under a Creative Commons license from flickr.com.
A cushion of reliable income is a wonderful thing. It can help pay for basic necessities. It can be saved for rainy days or used to pursue happiness on sunny days. It can encourage people to take entrepreneurial risks, care for friends, or volunteer for community service.

Conversely, the absence of reliable income is a terrible thing. It heightens anxiety and fear. It diminishes our ability to cope with crises and transitions. It traps many families on the knife's edge of poverty, and makes it harder for poor people to rise.

There's been much discussion of late about how to save America's declining middle class. The answer politicians of both parties give is always the same: jobs, jobs, jobs. The parties differ on how the jobs will be created—Republicans say the market will do it if we cut taxes and regulation. Democrats say government can help by investing in infrastructure and education. Either way, it still comes down to jobs with decent wages and benefits.

It's understandable that politicians say this: it was America's experience in the past. In the years following World War II, we built a solid middle class on the foundation of high-paying, mostly unionized jobs in the manufacturing sector. But those days are history. Today, automation and computers have eliminated millions of jobs, and private-sector unions have been crushed. On top of that, in a globalized economy where capital can hire the cheapest labor anywhere, it's no longer credible to believe that America's middle class can prosper from labor income alone.

So why don't we pay everyone some non-labor income—you know, the kind of money that flows disproportionately to the rich? I'm not talking about redistribution here. I'm talking about paying dividends to equity owners in good old capitalist fashion. Except that the equity owners in question aren't owners of private wealth, they're owners of common wealth. Which is to say, all of us.
One state—Alaska—already does this. The Alaska Permanent Fund uses revenue from state oil leases to invest in stocks, bonds and similar assets, and from those investments pays equal dividends to every resident. Since 1980, these dividends have ranged from $1,000 to $2,000 per year per person, including children (meaning that they’ve reached up to $8,000 per year for households of four). It’s therefore no accident that, compared to other states, Alaska has the third highest median income and the second highest income equality.

Alaska’s model can be extended to any state or nation, whether or not they have oil. Imagine an American Permanent Fund that pays dividends to all Americans, one person, one share. A major source of revenue could be clean air, nature’s gift to us all. Polluters have been freely dumping ever-increasing amounts of gunk into our air, contributing to ill-health, acid rain and climate change. But what if we required polluters to bid for and pay for permits to pollute our air, and decreased the number of permits every year? Pollution would decrease, and as it did, pollution prices would rise. Less pollution would yield more revenue. Over time, trillions of dollars would be available for dividends.

And that’s not the only common resource an American Permanent Fund could tap. Consider the substantial contribution society makes to publicly traded stock values. When a company like Facebook or Google goes public, its value rises dramatically. The extra value derives from the vastly enlarged market of investors who can trust a public company’s financial statements (filed quarterly with the Securities and Exchange Commission) and buy or sell its shares with the click of a mouse. Experts
call this a ‘liquidity premium,’ and it’s generated not by the company but by society.

This socially created wealth now flows mostly to a small number of Americans. But if we wanted to, we could spread it around. We could do that by charging corporations for the extra liquidity that society provides. Let’s say we required public companies to deposit 1 percent of their shares in the American Permanent Fund for ten years, up to a total of 10 percent. This would be a modest price not just for public liquidity but for other privileges (limited liability, perpetual life, constitutional protections) we currently grant to corporations for free. In due time, the American Permanent Fund would have a diversified portfolio worth trillions of dollars. As the stock market rose and fell, so would everyone’s dividends. A rising tide would truly lift all boats.

There are other potential revenue sources for common wealth dividends. For example, we give free airwaves to media companies and nearly perpetual (and nearly global) copyright protection to entertainment and software companies. These free gifts are worth big bucks. If their recipients were required to pay us for them, we’d all be a little richer.

Regardless of its revenue sources, the mechanics of an American Permanent Fund would be simple. Every U.S. resident with a valid Social Security number would be eligible to open a Shared Wealth Account at a bank or brokerage firm; dividends would then be wired to their accounts monthly. There’d be no means test—and no shame—attached to these earnings, as there are to welfare. Nor would there be any hint of class warfare—Bill Gates would get his dividends along with everyone else. And since the revenue would come from common wealth, there’d be no need to raise taxes or cut government spending. All we’d have to do is charge for private use of common wealth and feed the resulting revenue into an electronic distribution system.

The United States isn’t broke, as some Republican say; we’re a very wealthy and productive country. The problem is that our wealth and productivity gains flow disproportionately to the rich in the form of dividends, capital gains, rent and interest. If we want to remain a middle class nation, that needs to change. Jobs alone won’t suffice. We need to complement wages with non-labor income from the wealth we all own. That would truly make us an ownership society.

—PETER BARNES

Photo by Bread for the World under a Creative Commons license from flickr.com
Kim Klein, an eminent authority on fundraising for non-profit groups, first realized the importance of the commons one afternoon at a workshop in Monterrey, California.

“I was fielding questions about how groups can raise money,” she remembers, “and I realized that half the people in the room were school principals and superintendents, who were taking a day off of work because raising money had become so important to their jobs.”

Klein, author of *Fundraising for Social Change* and co-founder of the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*, immediately wondered, “What’s going on here?” Education is a commons that should be supported through public taxes, she says, not private donations. If school principals need to write grants to cover teacher’s salaries, something is wrong.

Even more shocking was another growing segment of the fundraising business that Klein noticed at the time. “About twice a month I got a call from parents who want to raise money to buy Kevlar vests for their kids in the Iraq War. Everything has become so privatized—even the safety of our soldiers.”

It’s become her mission to highlight the importance of the commons to people in the non-profit sector, which accounts for 10 percent of the workforce in the U.S. and 12 percent in Canada. She does this through her
firm Klein and Roth Consulting and the activist group Building Movement Project.

For Klein, a Methodist who once considered becoming a minister, the commons is a spiritual as well as a political and social issue.

“I introduce the idea of the commons into all my workshops, conversations and speeches,” she adds, “starting with the premise that the commons is becoming enclosed because of privatization, poor tax policy, environmental degradation and the like. I am now leading specific workshops on the role of taxes in our society.”

Klein lives in California, and therefore has seen firsthand the pain and suffering that happens with reflexive opposition to tax increases. “Tax cuts rarely save money for the public,” she notes. “They enclose our commons and they allow only very wealthy people and corporations to become wealthier. The sooner we understand the absurdity of saving money by cutting taxes, the sooner we can actually become the...nation that people imagine: welcoming to all, with high-quality schools and health care, well paying jobs, and vast protected natural beauty.”

She notes that in many countries, “people pay half their income in sales and income taxes. But they get a lot for it. Unlimited health care and universal higher education, for a start. That’s why they don’t hate taxes.”

Klein’s vision of a commons-based society is built on a foundation of sensible tax policy as well the civic sector, community involvement and people treating one another well. “How do we make sure each person has what they need and how can we take care of the common good? That cannot all be accomplished by philanthropy, it needs public funding.”

—JAY WALLJASPER
The Little Free Library That Could

*Bringing the shareable society to a sidewalk near you*

You can boost literacy, neighborliness and the commons all at once with a Little Free Library. It’s such an ingeniously simple idea, one wonders why no one thought of it until now. You can take a book or leave a book (or both) at these informal institutions, which “look like birdhouses and act like water coolers” according to the Minneapolis Star Tribune. They are popping up all over Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota, and spreading throughout the U.S. and Canada.

The idea began with social entrepreneur Todd Bol who built the first one in his home of Hudson, Wisconsin and kept right on going. He soon teamed up with his friend Rick Brooks in Madison to form the non-profit group Little Free Libraries to spread the idea. Today, they’ve nearly doubled their goal of establishing 2510 new libraries around the world, outdoing philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

For the latest about the movement as well as all the information you need about building, buying, stocking and maintaining a Little Library in your neighborhood, go to their website [Little Free Library](#).

—JAY WALLJASPER

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Beginning in the 1830s, the City of New York created a water system generally considered to have no equal in the world. Generations of city leaders chose to go far north and west of the City, to find rural environments that would provide pure, pristine water.

But in the 1980s, as the economics of industrialized agriculture began to undermine the economic vitality of the small family farms that dotted the Catskill mountains, things began to change. Catskill farmers, in a desperate attempt to remain economically viable, began industrializing their own farm operations. Chemical fertilizer use increased, erosion accelerated, and pathogen contamination began to grow. Farmers also began selling off the forested portions of their land for environmentally damaging exurban development.

By the end of the 1980s, public health specialists were publicly stating the City would have to substantially increase the treatment of its drinking water source. The costs for the advanced treatment were estimated to be $4 billion to build and $200 million annually to operate. This would double the cost for water in New York City, with major adverse impacts on low-income families.

Thus, when I became Commissioner of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection and Director of the New York City Water and Sewer system in early 1990, determining if there was any alternative to this was at the top of a very crowded agenda. However, unlike nearly the entire American water industry and its regulators, both of which were dominated by civil and public health engineers who thought almost exclusively in facility construction terms to solve water quality problems, my background was in management reform, public finance and environmental policy, particularly land use.

My new management team and I were quickly convinced that allowing Catskill drinking water purity to deteriorate and then spending
massive sums to clean it up was not the ideal option. The team’s philosophy was that a good environment will produce good water. And that made investing in the environment a smart and profitable investment for New York City.

It took eighteen months of mutual work between the City and the Catskill farming community but, in the end, using concepts that have now come to be called ecosystem services, an innovative and far reaching agreement was crafted.

Operationally, the question became what environmental investments should the city make. Some, such as adding to the publicly held land in the watershed—particularly critical lands threatened by development—along with stream corridor restorations and better stewardship of city owned lands were obvious. But that did not answer how to control non-point source pollution on privately held farmlands and other rural landscapes.

The City began to organize an unprecedented program of regulatory enforcement against non-point source pollution runoffs in its watersheds. Some farmers and other rural landowners reacted angrily. But with the city’s support, the Catskill farmers created a program they called “Whole Farm Planning,” which incorporated environmental planning into the business strategy of the farm. A pollution control plan was developed for each farm by the farmer and local farm and agricultural experts.

To ensure pollution control efforts would reach critical mass, the program set a goal of obtaining the participation rate of 85% of Catskill farmers within five years. Thus, while the program was voluntary for any individual farmer, the Catskill farm community as a whole was committed to reach a goal that would ensure the City met its pollution reduction objectives. After five years, 93% of all Catskill farmers were full program participants.

In terms of Clean Water, the results speak for themselves:

There was a 75% to 80% reduction in farm pollution loading;
The pristine quality of the City’s drinking water was preserved and improved, and the threat that New York would have to spend billions on advanced treatment of drinking water was eliminated;

The program paid for itself many times over through its many cost savings and played a critical role in helping to stabilize water and sewer tariffs, providing major benefits to low-income households;

The program was wildly popular with the public and helped build strong urban support for future watershed protection efforts by New York City.

On a broader scale, the Catskill program spurred watershed protection and environmentally-friendly farm programs throughout the United States and catalyzed interest in non-traditional facility construction approaches of the U.S. water industry.

Ecosystem service payment programs like the one used in New York are a way of capturing the environmental profits from the services rural ecosystems provide urban areas and then funneling those profits back into the rural landscapes and the rural communities that provide them, creating a righteous cycle of mutually supportive economic and ecological investments between urban and rural areas, leading to a more sustainable future for both.

The importance of these payments for environmental services (PES) to the future of rural landscapes in particular cannot be overstated. All over the world, rural landscapes are being transformed at a rate that has no historic or economic parallel. PES payments can stabilize rural land use at a more balanced point by making environmental stewardship a new source of economic wealth for rural populations.

The list of water related ecosystem services is almost endless. Water utilities need to go beyond deployment of their traditional engineering skills and pioneer innovative financial arrangements with upstream residents, as New York City did, to take full advantage of these potentials.

—ALBERT APPLETON
Traffic calming has swept the world over the past 20 years. It’s based on the rather simple idea that cars and trucks don’t have exclusive ownership of our streets. Streets are shared commons that also belong to people on foot and bicycles, in baby strollers and wheelchairs. Reminding motorists of this fact, traffic calming uses design features such as narrowing roads, adding speed bumps or elevating crosswalks to slow traffic and assert pedestrians’ right to cross the street.

This idea has altered the literal landscape of urban life in the Northern Europe, North America and the rest of the world as people move about their communities with more ease and pleasure.

The origins of this ingenious idea trace back to Delft, Netherlands, where residents of one neighborhood were fed up with cars racing along their streets, endangering children, pets and peace of mind. One evening they decided to do something about it by dragging old couches, coffee tables and other objects out into the roadway and positioning them in such a way that cars could pass but would have to slow down. Police soon arrived on the scene and had to admit that this project, although clearly illegal, was a really good idea. Soon, the city itself was installing similar measures called woonerfs (Dutch for “living yards”) on streets plagued by unruly motorists.

Invented by neighbors in Delft, Netherlands, who were tired of cars speeding down their street, traffic calming is now spreading throughout the world.
One can only imagine the response of city officials if these neighbors had meekly come to city hall to propose the idea of partially blocking the streets; they would have been hooted right out of the building. But by taking direct action, they saved their neighborhood and improved everyday life in cities around the world.

—JAY WALLJASPER

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How Indigenous Forms of Governance Can Improve Our Modern World

Ardoch Algonquin Chief Robert Lovelace helps us re-imagine society’s relationship to nature

Indigenous cultures are complex knowledge systems that utilize energy, food security, transportation and communications in balance with natural systems. Understanding how indigenous economies, as well as social and cultural systems work can help bend the curve against the prospects of social, environmental and economic failure.

Present governance structures conform little to environmental or ecosystem realities. For the most part, political boundaries were created to serve colonial settlement, resource extraction and industrial manufacturing while denaturing ecosystems and limiting environmen-
tally appropriate governance. Faced with overexploitation of resources, ecosystem degradation, contamination of soils and water and climate change, the people of North America need to re-imagine how we connect to the earth. Ecosystem appropriate governance is a step in the right direction. We also need to ensure economic, social and cultural practices work with natural replenishment cycles rather than against them.

Language is the “signature” of culture. How we speak to one another, how we describe and discuss the world in which we live, determines our success in relating to the world. Indigenous knowledge systems are reflections of empirical interaction with the earth, rational discovery, symbolic imagery and social reinforcement, directed toward a deep understanding of the local. Indigenous languages are verb-based rather than using nouns as the foundation for communication as we do in English. If we simply want to acquire “things,” then the structure of our present language works fine. If we want to relate with the world, make appropriate ecological choices, and rebuild collapsing environments then we need to learn, think and create in action words. We need to live within dynamic eco-natural processes to live well together.

– ROBERT LOVELACE

Professor Robert Lovelace, retired Chief of the Ardoch Algonquin First Nation, has decoded elements of aboriginal governance that are key to re-indigenizing the commons. Lovelace presented part of his work at the Great Lakes Commons Gathering. Excerpted from “Kosmos magazine.”
Here is a small town that thrives on a kind of agriculture where scale matters, stakeholders collaborate, and, in most cases, ownership has more to do with stewardship than it does with possession. Community members know each other by name and value civic engagement. Young people who moved away for bigger and “better” opportunities now flock home, seeking jobs and dedicating themselves to community improvement. This town, Hardwick, Vermont, embodies the spirit of the commons in so many ways—but it wouldn’t be that way without the vision and drive of Tom Stearns, an ardent commons advocate and the founder of High Mowing Organic Seeds.

Over his years working in the seed business, Stearns has come to understand that, even more so than the land he works, the seeds themselves are a special kind of commons. The vegetable seeds we have now, he says, are vastly different than the seeds that existed one hundred years ago, and today’s seeds will assume new qualities in the future. That’s partly why privatization and commodification have become commonplace in the seed industry. Corporate giants have denied public access to information about our seed resource because “when you control seeds, you control a lot,” says Stearns.

But the High Mowing team engages and interacts with everyone who uses seeds, including farmers and gardeners, plant breeders at universities, other seed companies, and soil scientists. They do this in an effort to bring the seed community’s collective wisdom to bear on how to develop new seed varieties, how
to make seeds available to consumers, and how to promote them as a critical element in building healthy food systems. By encouraging this knowledge sharing, High Mowing empowers the whole community to engage in a ten-thousand-year-old practice of food provision that is vital for the future. They are framing seed saving as a commons-based solution.

Stearns is also a co-founder of the Center for an Agricultural Economy, a Hardwick-based nonprofit that coordinates regional food system activity. Among many other contributions to the community, the nonprofit just purchased the old town common. Until recently, no one had hope that Hardwick, an aging granite-mining center, would ever recover from the mining industry collapse. The town common had been neglected since the thirties, but members of the Center for an Agricultural Economy saw its potential and purchased the sixteen acres in the heart of Hardwick. Today, Stearns describes all kinds of activity planned for the property, including an educational farm and community garden.

The combined effect of these many assorted commons solutions is a small town renaissance no one could have expected in Hardwick. Stearns describes countless new economic opportunities growing up around healthy food, ecological awareness, and value-added agriculture. There are new jobs—good jobs—at High Mowing and elsewhere.

The rural “brain drain” is reversing in this area, as smart young people who moved away are coming home. People are once again running for town select boards and school boards. “People are actually competing [for those positions] because they want to have a voice,” Stearns says. “It’s really cool.” When asked about the secrets to this success, Stearns speculates that Vermont’s size has something to do with it. Towns operate on a “human-scale,” and political figures are readily accessible (you might event spot the governor walking down the street, he says). As a result, people sense their ability to make an impact—they are not just one among millions. To Stearns’s mind, the hopelessness that comes from feeling inconsequential is one of the main obstacles to creating commons-based societies in other places today.

—JESSICA CONRAD
A Sampling of Commons Projects All Over

From Bangkok to Grand Rapids to London

The projects profiled below represent a wide array of individuals and organizations working to build community and create a better future for all. With a focus on co-creation and developing a sense of belonging within communities at the local level, these initiatives showcase the commitment and creativity required for establishing a commons-based society. Read on to learn about The Rapidian, a community-driven, hyperlocal news source located in Grand Rapids, Michigan; 350.org, a global, grassroots movement dedicated to solving the climate crisis; and more.

**The Oregon Commons**, a volunteer-driven nonprofit organization, inspires appreciation, stewardship and advocacy for the Oregon commons—“the gifts of nature and civilization shared across generations.”

**City Repair Project**, also based in Oregon, employs artistic and ecologically oriented place making strategies. City Repair inspires people to understand themselves as part of a larger community, participate in decision-making that shapes their future, and realize their creative potential.

Down the cost in Point Reyes Station, California, **West Marin Commons** aims to enhance, protect, and illuminate our shared environment. The organization creates space for spontaneous sociability and community activities, including sharing rides, garden produce, tools, and “household stuff.”

The **Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance**, based in Gloucester, Massachusetts, works to restore enduring marine systems. If we truly care about the health of our oceans, does it matter how, where, and when we fish? NAMA strongly believes it does.

Across the Atlantic, **The London Orchard Project** plants community orchards in London’s unused spaces. The initiative has many local ben-
efits, including the promotion of fruit production within communities, the greening of London’s urban environment, the creation of wildlife habitats, increased biodiversity within city limits, and improved food security. It also helps Londoners rediscover the simple pleasure of eating organic fruit grown close to home.

350.org, founded by author Bill McKibben, is a global grassroots movement to solve the climate crisis. 350.org is well known for its online campaigns, grassroots organizing, and mass public actions—all of which are led from the bottom up by thousands of volunteer organizers in over 188 countries.

On the hyperlocal level, The Rapidian is a news source powered and published by citizen journalists in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It provides tools, training, platforms, and support to empower neighborhood residents to report community news from the inside out. The Rapidian promotes inclusiveness, civility, and ethical reporting as the foundation for increasing civic engagement.

The School of Commoning utilizes the global communication and information sharing capacities of the Internet. As an online resource for people who want to learn about the commons, the School offers a bank of resources and educational programs to commoners around the world.

Located in Sacramento, California, the Sol Collective provides arts, cultural, and education programming that supports social justice and empowers youth. The Collective maintains a brick and mortar center, which often hosts art exhibitions, multimedia workshops, apprentice/mentorship programs, and community forums.

Occupy Sandy illustrates the power of commons solutions—without the burden of bureaucratic red tape—in times of crisis. An impressive, nimble, and well-coordinated relief effort to distribute resources and volunteers to help neighborhoods affected by Hurricane Sandy, Occupy Sandy is a grassroots emergency management response formed by a coalition of individuals from Occupy Wall Street, 350.org, recovers.org, and interoccupy.net.

In Detroit, Michigan, there is another locus of commoning in response to crisis. The People’s Water Board maintains that “water is life” and a human right. The Board advocates that all people should have access to clean and affordable water.
The Greening of Detroit’s Openspace program is another Detroit-based effort that aims to transform some of the 100,000 vacant lots in the city into places that contribute to the fabric of the community. The program helps residents turn lots into community gardens, fruit orchards, market gardens, pocket parks, and native plant gardens.

The local arts community is yet another key group making a commons-based contribution in Detroit. The projects are numerous and inspiring and include Detroit Artists Market, 555 Creative Community, and Community Arts Partnerships Detroit, to name but a few.

 Restore/Restory, is an interactive story map that gives a people's history of the Cache Creek Nature Preserve in Woodland, California. The project tells the diverse stories of California’s peoples, traditions, and relationship to the land.

In St. Paul, Minnesota, the Vital Aging Network promotes self-determination, civic engagement, and personal growth for people as they age through education, leadership development, and opportunities for connection.

CoCo Coworking, also based in the Twin Cities, is a place where independent workers, small businesses and corporate workgroups can gather to share ideas, team up on projects and get work done.

The Minneapolis, Minnesota-based Institute for Local Self-Reliance provides innovative strategies, working models and timely information to support environmentally sound and equitable community development. Don’t miss their recent TEDx Talk: Why We Can’t Shop Our Way to a Better Economy.

And in an effort to engage thinkers around the world in conversation about economics and the commons, the Commons Strategies group, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation are hosting three Commons Deep Dive workshops—two of which already took place during October and November—in Mexico City, a city near Paris, and Bangkok. These Deep Dives will serve as preparatory events for a major international conference called “The Economics of the Commons” to be held in Berlin next May.

– ON THE COMMONS TEAM
Explore Deeper into the Commons

OTC’s Field Guide to what’s happening across the world

All That Share: A Field Guide to the Commons

This is a wake up call that will inspire you to see the world in a new way. As soon as you realize that some things belong to everyone, you become a commoner, part of a movement that’s reshaping how we will solve the problems facing us. Edited by former Utne Reader editor Jay Walljasper, All That We Share is an indispensable introduction to fresh ideas that touch all of us.

You can [purchase a copy of the book here](#).

And [download the first chapter](#), “What is the Commons?” for free here.

What Readers are Saying:

“Jay Walljasper performs the greatest of services with this book. It is—choose your metaphor—a bracing slap across the face or a kiss that breaks an enchantment. In either case, after reading it you will be much alive to the world.”

– Bill McKibben, bestselling author and co-founder of 350.org

“I have been studying the commons for several decades now; to my surprise and delight this wonderful book taught me many things I didn’t know. Jay Walljasper has done us all a great favor.”

– Lewis Hyde, author, The Gift and Common as Air
On the Commons is a commons movement strategy center founded in 2001. Our purpose is to activate the emergence of a commons-based society by:

Building and bringing visibility to the commons movement.
Initiating and catalyzing commons work that focuses on commons-based solutions.
Developing and encouraging commons leadership.

Commoners like you make our work possible. Please consider supporting our efforts by making a donation today. You can click here to contribute.

All these stories were adapted from On the Commons Website, onthecommons.org