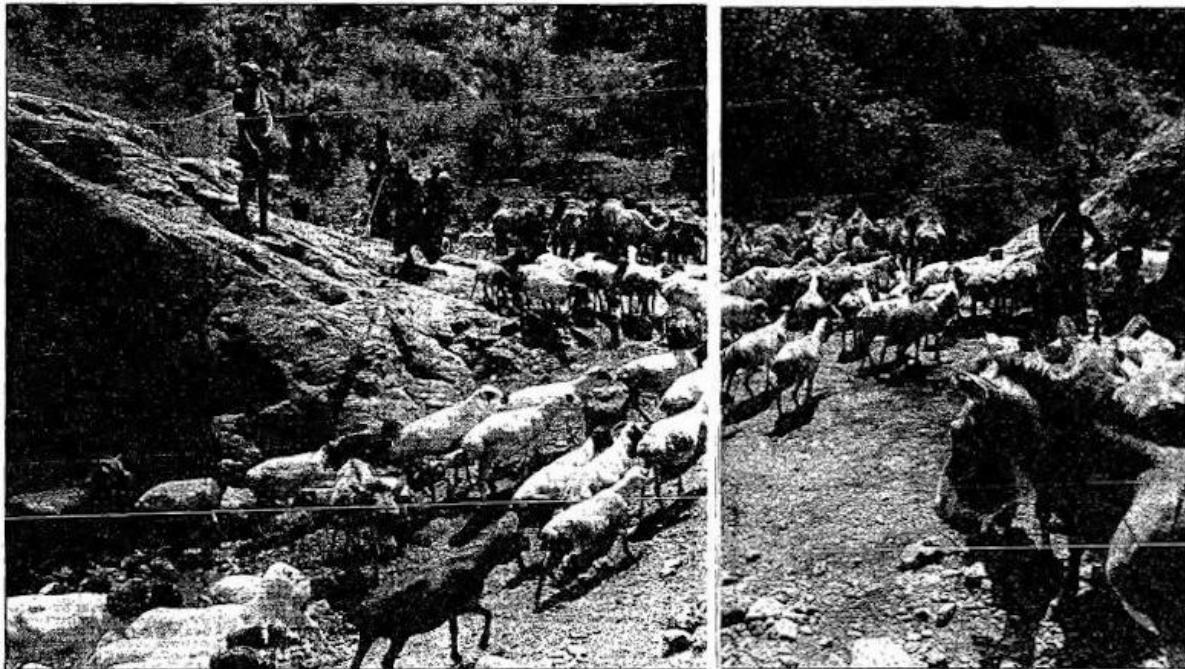


# **The real tragedy of the commons**

**Britain's environmental protesters and Third World tribes  
are fighting the same battle — for community property**

George Monbiot

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At the crossroads... the UN and western experts regulated the common land of the Turkana people to disastrous effect

PHOTOGRAPH. ADRIAN ARBIB

THE BATTLES over Twyford Down, Oxleas Wood and now Jesmond Dene in Newcastle reproduce in miniature a war being fought all over the world. While in Britain the communities facing the Department of Transport are trying to defend their landscapes for spiritual and aesthetic reasons, in many countries the very survival of the combatants is at stake.

The war is over common property. Whether in Oxleas Wood or the remotest rain-forest, the battlelines are the same. They are drawn between those who want to defend it and those who would enclose it. The future of the global environment depends on whether this battle is won.

While common land has been disappearing at extraordinary rates around the world, the effects are nowhere more vivid than in Africa. During the long dry seasons in the far north west of Kenya, the people of the Turkwel river keep themselves alive by feeding their goats on the pods of the acacia trees growing on its banks. Every clump of trees is controlled by a committee of elders, who decide who should be allowed to use them and for how long.

Anyone new to the area who wants to feed his goats on the pods must negotiate with the ciders. Depending on the size of the crop, they will allow him in or tell him to move on. If anyone over-exploits the pods or tries to browse his animals without

negotiating with the elders he will be driven off with sticks: if he does it repeatedly he may be killed.

The acacia woods are a common: a resource owned by many families. Like all the commons of the Turkana people, they are controlled with fierce determination. In the sixties and seventies, the Turkana were battered by a combination of drought and raiding by enemy tribes armed with automatic weapons. Many people came close to starvation. and the Kenyan government, the United Nations Development Programme and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation decided that they had to be helped.

The authorities knew nothing of how the Turkana regulated access to their commons. What they saw. in the acacia forests, and the grass and scrublands of the savannahs, was a succession of unrelated people moving in. taking as much as they wanted, then moving out. If the Turkana tried to explain how it worked, their concepts were lost in translation. The experts blamed the lack of regulation for the disappearance of the vegetation. This was, in fact, caused not by people but by drought.

They decided that the only way to stop the people from overusing their resources was to settle them down, get rid of most of their animals and encourage them to farm. On the banks of the Turkwel River they spent \$60,000 a hectare on a series of irrigation schemes, where exnomads could own a patch of land and grow grain.

People flocked in, not, on the whole, to farm, but to trade, to find paid labour or to seek protection from their enemies. With the first drought the irrigation scheme collapsed. The immigrants reverted to the only certain means of keeping themselves alive in the savannahs: herding animals. They spread along the banks, into acacia woods.

Overwhelmed by their number, the elders could do nothing to keep them away from their trees. If they threatened to kill anyone for taking pods, they were reported to the police. The pods and the surrounding grazing were swiftly exhausted and people started to starve. The commons had become a free-for-all. The authorities had achieved exactly what they set out to prevent.

The overriding of commoners' rights has been taking place for centuries all around the world. But in the last two decades it has accelerated. The impetus for much of this change came from a paper published 25 years ago, whose title had become a catchphrase among developers.

In *The Tragedy Of The Commons*, Garrett Hardin, an American biologist, argued that common property will always be destroyed, because the gain that individuals make by over-exploiting it will outweigh the loss they suffer as a result of its over-exploitation. He used the example of a herdsman, keeping his cattle on a common pasture. With every cow the man added to his herds he would gain more than he lost: he would be one cow richer, while the community as a whole would bear the cost of the extra cow. He suggested that the way to prevent this tragedy was to privatise or nationalise common land.

The paper had an enormous impact, appearing to provide some of the answers to the growing problem of how to prevent starvation. For authorities such as the

World Bank and western governments it provided a rational basis for the widespread privatisation of land. In Africa, among newly-independent governments looking for dramatic change, it encouraged the massive transfer of land from tribal peoples to the state or to individuals. In Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas, developers hurried to remove land from commoners and give it to people they felt could manage it better. The commoners were encouraged to work for those people as waged labour or to move to the towns where, in the developing world, they could become the workforce for the impending industrial revolutions.

But Hardin's paper had one critical flaw. He had assumed that individuals can be as selfish as they like in the commons because there is no one to stop them. In reality, traditional commons are closely regulated by the people who live there. There are two elements to common property: common and property. A common is the property of a particular community which, like the Turkana of the Turkwel River, decides who can use it and to what extent

Hardin's thesis works only where there is no ownership. The oceans, for example, possessed by no one and poorly regulated, are overfished and polluted, as every user tries to get as much out of them as possible, and the costs of their exploitation are borne by the world as a whole. But these are not true commons. In a true common, everyone watches everyone else, for anyone over-exploiting a resource is exploiting them.

The effects of dismantling the commons to prevent Hardin's presumed tragedy of over-exploitation can not be overstated. In Brazil, for example, peasant communities are being pushed off their land to make way for agro-industry. Land that supported thousands of people becomes the exclusive property of one family. Mechanisation means that hardly any permanent labour is needed-

No group has suffered more than the people singled out by Hardin's paper; the traditional herders of animals, or pastoralists. In Kenya the Maasai have been cajoled into privatising their commons; in some parts every family now owns a small ranch. Not only is this destroying Maasai society, as tight communities are artificially divided into nuclear families, but it has undercut the very basis of their survival.

In the varied and changeable savannahs, the only way a herder can survive is by moving. Traditionally the Maasai followed the rain across their lands, leaving an area before its resources were exhausted and returning only when it had recovered. Now, confined to a single plot, they have to graze it until drought or overuse brings the vegetation to an end. When their herds die, entrepreneurs move in, buy up their lands for a song and either plough them for wheat and barley, exhausting the soil within a few years, or use them as collateral for securing business loans.

In Britain we choose to remember the positive effects of enclosure; the creation of a workforce to drive the Industrial Revolution. But the expropriation of common land by private landlords often took place centuries before industrialisation. The dispossessed commoners became vagrants, hounded from county to county, without licences permitting them to work, begging and stealing to get by, sometimes expressing their fury by rioting or burning the new owners' hayricks. It was only after hundreds of years of

proscription, destitution and starvation that jobs for the dispossessed became widely available in the cities.

These changes in the ownership of land lie at the heart of our environmental crisis. Traditional rural communities use their commons to supply most of their needs: food, fuel, fabrics, medicine and housing. To keep themselves alive they have to maintain a diversity of habitats: woods, grazing lands, fields, ponds, marshes and scrub. Within these habitats they need to protect a wide range of species: different types of grazing, a mixture of crops, trees for fruit, fibres, medicine or building.

The land is all they possess, so they have to look after it well. But when the commons are privatised, they pass into the hands of people whose priority is to make money. The most efficient means of making it is to select the most profitable product and concentrate on producing that.

So, in Kenya, the Maasofs savannahs — a mixture of woods and scrub, grasslands and flowering swards — are replaced with uniform fields of wheat. The crofts of Scotland, whose forests, marshes, fields and pastures answered all the commoners' needs, gave way to sheep and pine plantations. As the land is no longer the sole means of survival, but an investment that can be exchanged, the new owners can over-exploit it and reinvest elsewhere.

As land changes hands, so does power. When communities own the land they make the laws to suit their own needs. Everyone is responsible for ensuring that everyone else obeys them. As landlords take over, it is their law that prevails. Thus, when the people living around Twy-ford Down try to prevent a road from destroying the common, it is they who are arrested for impeding the bulldozers, rather than the developers, who are committing, in commoners' terms, a crime.

The language in which the old laws were expressed gives way to the language of outsiders. With it go many of the concepts encouraging people to protect their environment. Translated into the dominant language, they appear irrational. As they disappear, so does much that makes our contact with the countryside meaningful: it becomes a series of unrelated resources, rather than an ecosystem of which we, economically, culturally and spiritually, are a part. For human beings, as for the biosphere, the tragedy of the commons is not the tragedy of their existence but the tragedy of their disappearance.

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The Guardian, Aug 6, 1993, page 39. <[www.newspapers.com/image/260095729](http://www.newspapers.com/image/260095729)>

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