



Talking Conservation

Drie Valleyen

THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS AND THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

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On behalf of Sedgefield Ratepayers & Residents Ass Association

In 1968, American ecologist, Garret Hardin, published an essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, in which he explores the idea of resource management, and the challenges posed by the overuse of shared resources. He used the metaphor of a common grazing area, or "commons," and the consequences when people act in self-interest which could deplete or destroy the resources of the common area. He also suggested practical solutions. The following can be regarded as commons in our town: Floodplains for the protection against floods, undeveloped ridges for their aesthetic value and coastal dunes for the protection they offer. The estuary as a source of passive and active recreation and as a food resource and parks for recreation and green corridors. All of the above mentioned play an important role in the protection of our biodiversity.

The commons is a well-known concept in South Africa where tribal land is held in trust by the government for the benefit of the communities living on it. Traditional leaders manage this land according to customary law. The land is not owned by individuals but is managed collectively and used by the community. This system aims to preserve the Indigenous populations' cultural heritage

and social structures.

According to Hardin, individuals act in self-interest, seeking to maximise their gain from the resource. As more people exploit the commons, i.e., overgrazing cattle beyond the land's carrying capacity, overmining its resources, polluting more than the land can naturally recycle, and building on floodplains, the resource becomes overburdened and depleted. He calls this situation the "tragedy of the commons," where the collective drive for individual benefit leads to the ruin of the shared resource, which nature gives us at no cost. It includes the air we breathe, clean water, fertile soil, plants, food, and vistas.

Hardin identifies two factors contributing to the tragedy. First, individuals tend to exploit resources for personal gain, reaping all the benefits while avoiding the cost of their depletion. This imbalance between personal gain and shared loss encourages overuse of the resource. Second, the ineptitude of a regulatory authority to apply or enforce legislation and protect property rights makes it difficult to implement effective management strategies. Without regulations or the application thereof, individuals are more likely to prioritise immediate gains over the resource's long-term sustainability.

Hardin explores potential solutions to the tragedy of the commons such as the notion of "mutual coercion," where societies collectively establish rules and regulations to limit resource use. By enforcing consumption limits and imposing penalties for overuse, communities can help prevent the depletion of common resources. South Africa already has good environmental laws that could deal with this problem. However, implementation remains challenging because the law is not enforced, which enables irresponsible – or ignorant – citizens to exploit the resource. Hardin also suggested privatisation and government intervention as solutions. Privatisation involves converting the commons into

private property, which gives the owner a personal stake in preserving the resource. Then again, this approach could lead to unequal access and potential monopolies. Government intervention would mean regulatory measures to control resource use. He warns against relying solely on this approach due to the risk of inefficiency and unintended consequences. Hardin believes that population growth worsens the problem as more people compete for limited resources: "a finite world can support only a finite population." He points out that this phenomenon is not confined to physical resources like grazing land; it also applies to pollution, overfishing, and the depletion of non-renewable resources.

Hardin's views are important

because they highlight the significance of balancing individual interests with collective well-being to achieve sustainable resource management. It points out the importance of environmental conservation, resource governance, and the complexities of addressing global challenges.

The precautionary principle, an innovative intent, aims to protect the environment by emphasising preventive action in the face of scientific uncertainty or potential risks. It involves evaluating available scientific evidence, assessing potential consequences of inaction, evaluating various actions, and involving all interested parties in the decision-making process. The principle was entrenched at the

1992 Rio Conference on the Environment and Development when the Rio Declaration was adopted. Principle 15 of this declaration states that: "... in order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capability. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation". In other words, the principle is a cautious attitude towards actions that may endanger the biosphere that supports the future of humanity.

In the context of Hardin's essay and the precautionary principle, we Sedgefield residents, should consider our impact on the commons, and how we apply the precautionary principle in our personal capacity. We should be aware of others' impact on our commons and act accordingly.