

COMMONS FORUM *Commentary*

The Name Change; or, What Happened to the “P”?

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This past spring, members voted to change the name and the mission statement of the association. Overnight “Common Property” morphed into “the Commons,” as our association became “The International Association for the Study of the Commons.” This was, however, not a quick or rash decision. Rather it was a thoroughly discussed issue by the Council and members over the past four years. See especially *CPR Digest* No. 67, Dec. 2003 <http://www.iascp.org/E-CPR/cpr67.pdf> and *CPR Digest* No. 70 <http://www.iascp.org/E-CPR/cpr70.pdf> for some earlier discussions on this topic.

Members also approved the proposed mission statement change. The old statement read: *The Association is devoted to understanding and improving institutions for the management of environmental resources that are (or could be) held or used collectively. The Association’s goals are to encourage the development and exchange of knowledge and practical experience among diverse disciplines, areas, and resource types; and to promote the development and use of appropriate institutional designs.*

The new statement reads: *The Association is devoted to bringing together interdisciplinary researchers, practitioners, and policymakers for the purpose of fostering better understandings, improvements, and sustainable solutions for environmental, electronic, and any other type of shared resource that is a commons or a common-pool resource.*

With the name change, the acronym of our Organization could be pronounced as “I ASK”, which may not be a bad motto. We can begin with asking what this name change means for the organization, and for scholarship and action on the commons. The name change is not an indication that property rights have become less important in the study of the commons. Nor does the revised mission statement signify that environmental resources are less crucial. Rather, the changes reflect the evolution of the field of study over the past twenty years. In the early days of the Association the former buzz phrase “common property resources” was almost an arbitrary term that usually meant some kind of shared resource system. In his seminal chapter in *Making the Commons Work*, Ron Oakerson (1992) wrote: “How are forests, fishing grounds, pastures, parks, groundwater supplies, and public highways all alike? Answer: each one is often—even typically—a ‘commons,’ a resource or facility shared by a community of producers or consumers. The list of common property resources and facilities is highly diverse and could be greatly expanded.” The Preface of the 1986 National Research Council volume tells us “the Council’s Conference on Common Property Resource Management was undertaken to assess systematically differing institutional arrangements for the effective conservation and utilization of jointly managed resources.”

The early focus on property rights was extremely important in clarifying the confused metaphor of Hardin's (1968) "Tragedy of the Commons." Numerous case studies illustrated the wide variety of rules that were used in diverse types of common-pool resources and that without distinguishing between open access situations and a variety of property rights, norms, and community mechanisms, one could not come to any conclusion. As this international, highly interdisciplinary area of study grew, deeper meanings were discovered. Researchers found they needed new terms and a more carefully chiseled language. Precision requires the distinction between the *resource*, such as a common-pool resource, and the *regime*, such as a common property regime. The term *common property resource* (the former name of our Digest!) is actually a contradiction in terms.

In order to truly understand the nature of the resource, scholars drew from the language of economics to illustrate that a common-pool resource was one of four types of economic goods (the others being private, public, and toll goods). A common-pool resource is a resource in which one person's use subtracts from another's and where it is difficult to exclude others from using the resource. Common property, on the other hand, is one type of property regime, often legally defined as jointly owned private property. Research about many different types of resources has found, however, that the property rights for jointly shared resources can be any one or several types of property regimes. There may be formal laws and informal rules in use. Property rights are often a bundle of rights. Groups, for instance, may have the right to access and harvest some of the resource units, but not others.

They may have the right to sell the harvested products but not sell the resource system. "Commons" is a general term that can apply to all types of shared resources. It can include various types of resources and regimes. It is obviously a popular term – scores of books by members have been published with the word "commons" in the title. And it makes sense. Titles such as *The Question of the Commons*, *Dividing the Commons*, *The Global Commons*, and *Governing the Commons* appeal to a much wider audience and certainly more accessible to a larger public. In the early days, the majority of commons' studies were on natural resources. More and more recently, researchers are finding enormous benefits in identification and analysis of new types of commons, such as genetic resources, tourism, and knowledge. One of the findings in the study of new types of commons is that the introduction of new technologies can play a huge role in the robustness or vulnerability of a commons. New technologies can enable the capture of what were once free and open public goods. This has been the case with the development of most "global commons," such as the deep seas, the atmosphere, and outer space, for example. This ability to capture the previously uncapturable creates a fundamental change in the nature of the resource, with the resource being converted from a nonrivalrous, nonexclusionary public good into a common-pool resource that needs to be managed, monitored, and protected in order to ensure sustainability and preservation. New commons are those that have become commons either through new capture, through regime or other types of institutional change, or through a reconceptualization of the resource or the community. Recognizing new threats of enclosures can bring rather sudden awareness of a "commons" to previously unsuspecting user groups. At the same time, efforts to understand why people co-create and subsequently share common institutions, ideas, tools, and infrastructure can help us all to expand the commons. Understanding the commons-like qualities of scientific databases, landscapes, the arts, open-source software, the electromagnetic spectrum, the atmosphere, education, city

sidewalks, playgrounds etc. can lead to deeper understandings of shared assets, capital, and materials. Commons thinking can help elucidate social dilemmas and suggest new ways of cooperation and trust-building. Researchers of new commons can draw upon the rich literature of traditional commons to find knowledge overlaps, draw from successful resource design principles, and possibly even apply lessons learned.

In surveying the recent commons literature there is a marked emphasis today on collective action, voluntary associations, and collaboration in general. Property rights and the nature of the good are still crucial in our analysis, but they can apply to intellectual property rights as well as to rights over tangible natural resources. The literature also goes beyond property rights to address questions of governance, the participatory process, trust and assurance. Many scholars are burrowing deeply into complexity and revisiting the concepts of polycentricity and nested systems. New research on resilience, globalization, international law, inequalities, and indigenous rights also contributes to a fuller comprehension of the commons.

The next biennial meeting in England will provide an opportunity to go back to the historical roots of the enclosure of the village commons, as well as to look at the contemporary tension between expansion and enclosure of the information commons and other types of shared resources. Whether groups are grappling with oil spills, biopiracy, anticommons, or the trend toward resource privatization, it is clear that recognitions of new types of commons are springing up all around us. This Association can lead the way in mentoring new areas of interest and new research agendas. We have become more inclusive and encompassing. Ultimately, we have realized, we are all in this together.

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