

Opportunities and challenges of cooperation in the commons

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Many natural resources, from fisheries to fresh water, are considered "common pool" resources (CPRs) because their management and use by an individual are impractical. The conventional wisdom is that such resources are destined for overuse because individuals will act in narrow self-interest without regard for the negative, cumulative impacts that may result. The favored – and often presumed only – solutions to this "tragedy of the commons" are privatization or government management.

In October, Indiana University political scientist Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for her work showing that the tragedy of the commons is not inevitable, and that privatization and state management are neither the only nor the best solutions in many cases. Under the right conditions, people and communities can cooperate in the commons. They do this by designing, implementing and enforcing their own *institutions* – social norms, rules and strategies - to govern resource use and mitigate overexploitation.

Ostrom's first study focused on water management in southern California, where saltwater intrusion threatened an important groundwater basin. She documented local efforts to form a water association to solve the problem, with diverse individuals cooperating to protect a CPR. Later studies showed similarly positive results in different settings.

Cooperation in the commons is challenging to develop and sustain, but under the right circumstances, such efforts, resource users and the resources they depend on can thrive. Based on analyses of thousands of case studies from around the world, Ostrom has identified several "design principles" that are key to successful CPR institutions. These include: clearly defined boundaries and rules, adequate conflict resolution mechanisms, monitoring and enforcement managed by the resource users themselves or someone accountable to them, sanctions that are mild for a first violation and stricter for repeated violations, and democratic processes that allow users to modify the rules.

CPR institutions are more likely to work in smaller communities and groups, where people know one another and can insure cooperation. But local institutions can be undercut by larger, external forces. For example, growers who work together to coordinate use of limited water supplies can be thwarted by the activities of upstream users. So it is also critical that outside authorities recognize the rights of users to self-organize, to reduce the chance that outside interests will over-run the local system. Moreover, cooperation on a smaller scale can lay the foundation for cooperation on a larger scale, with institutions built from the ground up.

In the current economic environment, it is easy to forget that people can work together for the common good, and that difficult circumstances can foster and strengthen local institutions. In honoring Elinor Ostrom, the Nobel Prize committee reminds us that it is part of human nature for people to cooperate, resolve conflicts and manage limited resources.

For more information about California fisheries and fishing communities – and institutions for common pool resource management - please contact Carrie Pomeroy at cmpomeroy@ucdavis.edu.