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2 examples of tragedy of the commons

First posited in 1968 by American ecologist Garret Hardin, the Tragedy of the Commons describes a situation where shared environmental resources are overused and exploited, and eventually depleted, posing risks to everyone involved. Hardin argues that to prevent this, there should be some restrictions to the amount of usage, for example, property rights must be affixed. — What is the Tragedy of the Commons? The definition of the Tragedy of the Commons is an economic and environmental science problem where individuals have access to a shared resource and act in their own interest, at the expense of other individuals. This can result in overconsumption, underinvestment, and depletion of resources. Garrett Hardin, an evolutionary biologist, wrote a paper called “The Tragedy of the Commons” in the journal Science in 1968. In summary of the Hardin paper, the Tragedy of the Commons addressed the growing concern of overpopulation, and Hardin used an example of sheep grazing land when describing the adverse effects of overpopulation. In this case, grazing lands held as private property will see their use limited by the prudence of the land holder in order to preserve the value of the land and health of the herd. Grazing lands held in common will become over-saturated with livestock because the food the animals consume is shared among all herdsmen. Hardin argues that individual short-term interest- to take as much of a resource as possible - is in opposition to societal good. If everyone was to act on this individual interest, the situation would worsen for society as a whole- demand for a shared resource would overshadow the supply, and the resource would eventually become entirely unavailable. Conversely, exercising restraint would yield benefits for all in the long-term, as the shared resource would remain available. Tragedy of the Commons Examples Arguably the best examples of Tragedy of the Commons occur in situations that lead to environmental degradation. Among many things, pollution is caused by wastewater. As the number of households and companies increase and dump their waste into the water, the water loses its ability to clean itself. This results in water that is toxic to wildlife and the people that live around and rely on it. Overfishing Another example of the Tragedy of the Commons lies in overfishing. In Canada, the Grand Banks fishery off the coast of Newfoundland was a means of livelihood for regional fishermen. Abundant in cod, the fishery allowed fishermen to catch as many cod as they desired without negatively impacting their population. Then, in the 1960s, advancements in technology allowed fishermen to catch vast quantities of cod, far more than before. However, with each passing season, the amount of cod deteriorated and by the 1990s, the fishing industry in the region collapsed because there wasn’t enough fish to go around. This situation where individual fishermen took advantage of opportunities to benefit themselves in the short term, even when their actions were clearly detrimental to society in the long term, encapsulates the self-preserving mindset behind the Tragedy of the Commons. These fishermen thought logically, but not collectively, which led to their downfall. COVID-19 The Tragedy of the Commons can also be applied to the COVID-19 pandemic. In its early days, people were generally wary of mixing with anyone outside their immediate family, leaving their homes less and working from home. However, another result of the pandemic was that people began to stock up on food and utilities. People likely assumed that everyone else would stock up as well and so the only solution was to preempt this scenario and stockpile food before the next person could. Again, people were thinking logically, but not collectively, and herein lies the relevance of the Tragedy of the Commons. Individuals took advantage of opportunities that benefited themselves, but spread out the harmful effects of their consumption across society. Retailers responded by imposing restrictions on the number of items one could buy, but it was too late. Entire grocery aisles were empty, wiped clean. You might also like: Carbon Tax: A Shared Global Responsibility For Carbon Emissions What About the Environment? Shared resources that mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis are abused constantly. No single authority can pass laws that protect the entire ocean. Each country can only manage and protect the ocean resources along its coastlines, leaving the shared common space beyond any particular jurisdiction vulnerable to pollution. This has led to obscene amounts of ocean pollution, as seen in garbage patches that accumulate in the centre of circular currents, for example. This will affect everyone as these pollutants cycle through the marine food chain, and then humans as we consume fish. Another problem facing the oceans are dead zones, areas in lakes and oceans where no marine life can live because of the lack of oxygen caused by excessive pollution and fertiliser runoff. The atmosphere is another resource being used and abused, as are forests. Unregulated and illegal logging pose great risks to forests’ ability to store carbon. In some parts of the world, vast expanses of rainforests aren’t governed in a way that allows effective management for resource extraction. Timber producers are driven to take as much timber as possible as cheaply as possible, without considering the wider impacts of doing so. Poor governance exacerbates the problem of the Tragedy of the Commons. Who is Meant to Fix It? Ideally, governments at the local, state, national and international levels would define and manage shared resources. However, there are problems with this. Management inside clear boundaries is quite straightforward, but more problematic are resources shared across jurisdictions. For example, at the international level, states are not bound by a common authority and may view restrictions on resource extraction as a threat to their sovereignty. Additionally, more difficulties arise when resources cannot be divided, such as in whale treaties when the fishing of the whales’ food source is separately regulated. Economist Scott Barrett at Columbia University in New York says that international law “has no teeth, so treaties are essentially voluntary. “Even when countries decide to take part in collective conservation efforts, they can simply pull out again when they want to,” as Canada did in 2011 when it pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol and when America withdrew from the Paris Agreement in late 2019 – though they rejoined shortly in the following year by the Biden Administration. As the global population increases and demand for resources follows, the downsides of the Commons become more apparent. Some may argue that this will test the role and practicality of nation-states, leading to a redefinition of international governance. Further, it may lead some to question the role of supranational governments, such as the UN or the World Trade Organization; as resources become more limited, some may argue that managing the commons may not have a solution at all. What Can Be Done? A potential solution to this is to affix property rights to public spaces. For example, charging a toll to use a freeway or implementing a tax for dumping wastewater would reduce the number of users to those who act in the best interests of others, not only themselves. Other solutions could include government intervention or developing strategies to trigger collective behaviour, such as assigning small groups in a community a plot of land to look after. Overall, regulating consumption and use can reduce over-consumption and government investment in conservation and renewal of the resource can help prevent its depletion. Featured image by: Matteo de Mayda Have you ever stopped to wonder about the environmental impact of your favorite everyday items? Perhaps they have a positive effect on the environment. Maybe that’s even why you chose to buy them. But let’s imagine for a moment that’s not the case and your favorite things aren’t great for the environment. What if their production or use actually threatens the ecosystem? Or worse, what if your consumption might threaten the existence of your favorite products? You might be thinking, “It can’t be. None of my favorite things threaten the sustainability of our ecosystem.” But it turns out there are many goods that are being produced unsustainably, endangering resources, or negatively impacting the environment. What Is the Tragedy of the Commons? The tragedy of the commons refers to a situation in which individuals with access to a shared resource (also called a common) act in their own interest and, in doing so, ultimately deplete the resource. This economic theory was first conceptualized in 1833 by British writer William Forster Lloyd. In 1968, the term “tragedy of the commons” was used for the first time by Garret Hardin in Science Magazine. This theory explains individuals’ tendency to make the best decisions for their personal situation, regardless of the negative impact they may have on others. An individual’s belief that others won’t act in the best interest of the group can lead them to justify their selfish behavior. When facing the use or potential overuse of a common or public good, individuals may act with their short-term interest in mind, for instance, using an unsustainable product, and disregard the harm it could cause to the environment or general public. It’s helpful for both firms and individuals to understand the tragedy of the commons so they can make more sustainable and environmentally-friendly choices. Here are five real-world examples of the tragedy of the commons, and an exploration of the solution to this problem. 5 Tragedy Of the commons examples 1. Coffee Consumption While a simple cup of coffee might seem harmless, coffee consumption is a prime example of the tragedy of the commons. Coffee plants are a naturally occurring shared resource, but over-consumption has led to habitat loss that has endangered 60 percent of the plants’ species—including the most commonly brewed Arabica coffee. 2. Overfishing As the global population continues to rise, the food supply needs to increase just as quickly. However, overhunting and overfishing have the potential to push many species into extinction. Overfishing of the Pacific bluefin tuna has caused an all-time population low of approximately three percent of their original population. This not only endangers the Pacific bluefin tuna, but also risks further marine ecosystem endangerment as a result. 3. Fast Fashion Overproduction by fashion brands has created extreme product surplus to the point that luxury brand Burberry burnt \$37.8 million worth of its 2018 season’s leftovers to avoid offering a discount on unsold wares. Furthermore, as new trends emerge rapidly due to the Internet and social media, consumers are constantly purchasing new clothing items and disposing of old, out-of-trend items that ultimately end up in landfills and contribute to pollution. 4. Traffic Congestion Traffic congestion is one of the best-known modern examples of the tragedy of the commons. According to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health, air pollution from traffic congestion in urban areas contributes to more than 2,200 premature deaths annually in the United States alone. As more people decide that roads and highways are the fastest way to travel to work, more cars end up on the roads, ultimately slowing down traffic and polluting the air. 5. Groundwater Use In the United States, groundwater is the source of drinking water for about half the population, and roughly 50 billion gallons are used each day for agriculture. Because of this, groundwater supply is decreasing faster than it can be replenished. In drought-prone areas, the risk for water shortage is high and restrictions are often put in place to mitigate it. Some individuals, however, ignore water restrictions and the supply ultimately becomes smaller for everyone. What’s the Solution to the Tragedy of the Commons? How would you react to discovering that your consumption habits are depleting natural resources? You have two primary options: Boycott the products or brands causing the alleged harm and find an alternative, sustainable way of getting your fix. Carry on with what Sustainable Business Strategy Professor Rebecca Henderson calls, “business as usual,” ignoring the impact of your consumption habits. After all, it’s easy to justify that your boycotting the product won’t make a large enough impact to make a difference. The tragedy of the commons shows us how, without some sort of regulation or public transparency of choices and actions associated with public goods, there’s no incentive for individuals to hold themselves back from taking too much. In fact, individuals may even have a “use it or lose it” mentality; if they’re aware of the inevitability that the good itself will be depleted, they may think, “I better get my share while I still can.” Related: What Does “Sustainability” Mean in Business? Let’s put this idea to the test: In which of the following cases would you hold yourself back from overusing? During a drought, your town regulates the days and times you’re allowed to water your lawn. How likely are you to disregard these parameters? Your local grocery store, which has always encouraged the use of reusable bags, has started to charge for each paper or plastic bag. How likely are you to start bringing your own bags? Let’s dig a little deeper into these options: If everyone in your community is abiding by the town’s lawn-watering regulations, you’re most likely going to abide by them as well. You don’t want a bright green lawn while the rest of the town’s lawns are brown, do you? Who wants to pay a premium for something that will likely be thrown away or used as a trash bag? Charging for grocery bags has upped the stakes, because you’ve now got some skin in the game. Chances are you’re much more likely to start keeping a reusable bag in your car, just in case you need to stop at the grocery store on the way home. These examples show how, when faced with a public good, individuals can be motivated to cooperate through monetary or moral incentives or penalties. What’s truly fascinating is that this also holds true on a larger scale. Remember one of our original examples of luxury fashion brands burning surplus? Well, Burberry—having heard its customers’ reactions to the burning of inventory, regardless of how sustainably its products were disposed—has since pledged to stop burning clothes and using real fur. Developing a Sustainable Mindset It’s easy for both individuals and organizations to fall victim to the tragedy of the commons. However, it doesn’t have to be this way. By developing a more sustainable mindset, you can become better aware of the long-term impact that your short-term choices have on the environment both in your personal life and at work. Are you interested in learning more? Explore our Sustainable Business Strategy course and other business in society courses to discover how you can make a difference and become a purpose-driven leader. This post was updated on April 1, 2021. It was originally published on February 9, 2019.

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