

Editorial Column

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The current state of open access journals mirrors the problematic qualities of one of the most infamous ideas of the past half-century: *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Hardin's seminal 1968 publication is quickly approaching its fiftieth anniversary, yet public interest has not waned. Rather, the application of his idea is being applied to more, not less, situations we face in the academic field of tourism. As *The Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* is an open-access journal, and an anniversary is approaching *The Tragedy of the Commons*, I believe now is an apt time to realize the application of this model to open access journals such as *The Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*.

The following paper views the Tragedy of the Commons from its inception to its current state in the academic literature, including critiques of the model. Once an understanding of the model is established I apply the learnings to the current state of the publication process within the academic pseudo-discipline of tourism. I hope to create a better understanding of how we are working against the betterment of our academic community by following our short-term individual interests.

The Tragedy of the Commons

In December 1968 an ecologist named *Garrett Hardin* published *The Tragedy of the Commons*. The publication emphasized an idea that would become a basis for tourism literature in areas including sustainable tourism, ecotourism, and cultural justice tourism [1]. The concept is even applicable to the plight of open access journals in tourism. *Hardin's* primary objective was to convey that multiple rational actors, when faced with limited resources, will each make decisions based upon what is in their personal interest. This is in lieu of making decisions for the betterment of their "community" and/or long-term interests.

Hardin's idea was built on the foundation of three previous ideas: *Adam Smith's* 1776 *Wealth of Nations*, *John Nash's* *Nash Equilibrium*, and *Bentham's* *Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Understanding the foundation of *Hardin's* work is paramount to understanding his theory [2,3].

The neoliberalist perspective *Adam Smith* (1776) offers in *The Wealth of Nations* is palpable in *Hardin's* work. Each individual in *The Tragedy of the Commons* is serving their own self-interest, as they are in *Adam Smith's* theory. *Adam Smith* wrote, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest [2]. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages" (p. 17).

Another example of guiding ideologies for *Hardin's* work is the *Nash Equilibrium*. The *Nash Equilibrium* refers to the idea that there is a point at which each of two competitors is pursuing the same strategy given the opposition's strategy [1].

The final foundational author in *The Tragedy of the Commons* is *Bentham*, who stated "the greatest good for the greatest number of people" (p.1). Upon reflection of the quote *Hardin* states there is no way for *Bentham's* goal to come to fruition [3]. *Hardin* instead turned to a technical solution, which he defined as, "A solution that requires a

change only in the techniques of the natural sciences, demanding little or nothing in the way of change in human values or ideas of morality" (p.1243), to discount *Bentham*, while calling for a non-technical solution to problems in the realm of social science in his journal article. None the less, *Bentham's* work played a large role in shaping *Hardin's* approach to the social sciences in *Tragedy of the Commons*. In fact, it could be argued that the title of *Hardin's* work is an answer to *Bentham's* statement. It would not be a *Tragedy* if there were not expectations in the first place. In fact, *Hardin* even states that he uses *Tragedy* because there is remorse in the way things work, and remorse, by definition, requires expectations.

Critiques of the Tragedy of the Commons

Academic works of perceived importance are oft-critiqued. *Hardin's* work falls in to this category. There are numerous critiques of his work. Some are unabashed disagreements with even his most basic premises. This includes *Larry Olsen*, who calls *Hardin* "Dr. Evil", an "enviro-liar", and a "wesel" (para.1) [4]. Some are obituaries that take an academic turn, while embellishing *Hardin's* "cultish" beliefs (*Steepleton*, 2003) [5]. Some are academic arguments, such as *Ostrom et al.* approach to critiquing *Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons* [6].

Critiques such as *Larry Olsen's* are politically-driven. The critiques are important for socio-cultural reasons, but within academia they can be discounted. Critiques such as *Steepleton's* are of a personal focus, and not on the published work. These too are important for socio-cultural reasons, but once again, they can be discredited from truly academic foci.

Elinor Ostrom et al.'s rebuttal, published thirty years after *Hardin's* original work, in the same journal (*Science*), plays an important role in how *Hardin's* work is remembered and how it influences the application and acceptance of *Hardin's* ideas, particularly in regards to its application to conservation practices in the tourism industry. This academic critique is possibly the most influential. It is at the very least the most highly cited critique of *Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons* according to Google Scholar.

The following summarization is a listing of the major points in *Hardin's* work. These are foci that can be critiqued in an academic approach. It is important to note these points because in work that is accepted in not only academia, but also in pop culture, there are judgments made about what an author may have "meant", when in

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Received October 11, 2012; Accepted November 20, 2012; Published November 24, 2012

Citation: Taillon J (2012) Editorial Column. J Tourism Hospit 1:e121. doi:10.4172/2167-0269.1000e121

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reality these are incorrect assumptions, such as *Larry Olsen's* critique of Hardin's work [4]:

- Hardin calls for a social science approach to solving certain problems in lieu of a "technical solution". "Technical solutions" stem from the natural sciences and are not necessarily applicable to the social sciences.
- A weighting system of what is "important" is needed for "goods" such as ski lodges, wilderness, and perhaps academic publications. Without an understanding of the value of a good there are problems maximizing "good".
- The carrying capacity of planet earth is unknown but important.
- The government is not properly adapting to necessary changes regarding pollution regulation.
- Morality is time specific. The "weight" (how much something is worth to society) of a ski lodge, "buffalo", and "national park" can change often.
- There is only a finite amount of space on earth. There needs to be a realization of this fact. A pro-active approach to finding solutions is necessary.

Ostrom et al. begin their critique of Hardin's work by admonishing him for the way society interpreted his work:

The starkness of Hardin's original statement has been used by scholars and policy-makers to rationalize central government control of all common-pool resources and to paint a dis-empowering, pessimistic vision of the human prospect. Users are pictured as trapped in a situation they cannot change. Thus, it is argued that solutions must be imposed on users by external authorities. Although tragedies have undoubtedly occurred, it is also obvious that for thousands of years people have self-organized to manage common-pool resources, and users often do devise long-term, sustainable institutions for governing these resources (p. 278).

Ostrom et al. focus on a few key assessments of Hardin's paper. They do not assess the paper holistically. Specifically, they interpret and focus on issues of privatization. Privatization has been a bi-product of Hardin's work. This is particularly interesting to many individuals in conservation [7]. Some of the applicable avowals Ostrom et al. make in regards to privatization include: telling the reader that advances in understanding and managing social science problems have been made since 1968; more solutions exist to problems Hardin mentioned than were offered in *Tragedy of the Commons*; both public and private common-pool resources are apt to fail. What does work is a system of regulation that restricts access and creates incentives; and the scale and complexity that exist in relation to common-pool resources due to enhanced globalization were not accounted for in Hardin's work. This idea nearly identically mirrors the publication process in the academic field of tourism.

Ostrom famously said, "I recommend mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of people affected" (University of Georgia, 2009, slide 11) [8]. Coercion in this context means regulation via restricting access and creating incentives in regards to common-pool resources. *Ostrom et al.* offers various case study examples as evidence. In one example Nepalese farmers use irrigation ditches that are "primitive" according to observers not from the community. Yet, these ditches are the best possible scenario for the farmers. "Improved" irrigation systems using modern irrigation practices have been built in certain areas. In these areas irrigation systems have not experienced

improved performance. They have in fact reduced performance. The similarities to the publication process in the academic field of tourism are stark.

Ostrom et al. apply their ideology and update to Hardin's work by stating that the past thirty years have seen such empirical and theoretical improvement that Hardin's argument does not hold "weight". His article lays an important framework, but tragedies of the commons are not inevitable. Ostrom et al. offer more guidance and more specific leadership than Hardin outlined in his original work. Ostrom et al. call for global institutions to regulate services to prevent what Hardin believed was inevitable. Conservation practices are necessary, and privatization and socialism are not fixes to this problem. A global marketplace with exponentially accelerating rates of change with extreme cultural diversity and inter-twined common-pool resources is commonplace. Ostrom et al. recommends a solution. "Organization at national and local levels can help, but it can also get in the way of finding solutions" (p. 281) [6].

The Application of the Tragedy of the Commons to the Academic Field of Tourism

We are facing the dilemma I refer to as a *Tragedy of the Commons* in the academic field of tourism. We are in general rational actors, with limited resources, in regards to both finance and physical support, and we act in our own best interests even though this is at times at odds with the betterment of our academic community. For example, we are oft-times judged by our publication numbers and the perceived value of the journal in which we publish. This is in lieu of the quality of the work, the value of our work to the broader academic community and industry practitioners, and the accessibility of our work. Although we often cite the importance of our research to industry, particularly as we are involved in an applied pseudo-discipline, we continue to publish our best work in journals that are not accessible to industry practitioners and academics at institutions without access to the "best" journals as defined by our tenure and promotion committees and documents.

The process of creating high quality yet inaccessible research is driven by us, academics. Yes, few of us are high-level Deans or process creators, but those who are have not changed the process. Furthermore, those of us serving on tenure and promotion committees can choose to employ qualitative measures to dictate the success of our peers. Although some colleagues may choose to employ such qualitative methods, we are all aware the number of publications and the level of journals, whether perceived or real, is the dictating driver.

I recommend you take to heart Hardin's idea of the *Tragedy of the Commons*, as well as *Ostrom's* response. The privatization of academic publications has not done academics favors. It has not done practitioners favors. It has helped, solely, the shareholders of the few companies dominating the marketplace of tourism-industry academic publications. While I can freely publish on my personal website, or create a text and sell it online as a hard copy or PDF, I am unable to have these counts towards my tenure and promotion activities. Open Access is not necessarily the answer, as many of them instead charge a premium to authors. This is limiting the publication of the research and is perhaps even more detrimental. Yet, creating a proper mix of the two with the sustainability of our academic community in mind would be wise for all of us. I do not claim to have an answer as to how to accomplish this, but a *Tragedy* awaits us if we continue to attempt to solve today's problems using yesterday's thinking.

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