



commoning



what is it?

It's collaborating and sharing to meet everyday needs and achieve well-being. There are 3 aspects: a resource pool (some shared stuff); a community of people (contributing to and depending on the pool); and a frame of regulation and governance. People often think of commons as just 'the stuff' – e.g. a piece of land, but it's not a commons until it's actively commoned by people with a mutual responsibility. It's more of a verb, an attitude, a practice, a way of living rather than a 'natural thing', 'out-there'. This attitude can apply to many kinds of resources: urban environment, digital communication, tools or equipment, indigenous means of subsistence, infrastructure of all kinds or cultural resources.

Commoning is quite distinct from (capitalist) markets and the (liberal) state. Its purpose is to ensure that resources don't end up being owned or controlled by one person or set of interests.

Commoning is certainly NOT 'the sharing economy' promoted by Über, Airbnb, Task Rabbit and the like. These are infrastructures owned by corporations that have been made to look like common pools, but which pump out private wealth and knowledge, serving wealthy elites.

(NB: see lowimpact.org/commoning for much more info on the sections below).

History: most people's needs through history have probably been met through commons, and c. 2 billion people today depend for at least part of their livelihood on resources held in common.

Hardin vs Ostrom: Garret Hardin became infamous for promulgating his view of commons as 'a tragedy'. Elinor Ostrom's painstaking research shows him to be mistaken.

Enclosure: preventing and ending enclosure is a core commitment of commoning. Three fundamental classes of means of subsistence and well-being have been increasingly taken out of commons - land, means of exchange and economic coordination / labour power.

Co-ops: a co-op is not (necessarily) a commons - a co-op is a commons of ownership and thus will by definition have some kind of democratic stewardship machinery. But formal ownership and the right to enjoy benefits of ownership are not the same as stewardship and curating - fundamental dimensions of commoning.

'Open' everything: when the words 'open' or 'collaborative' are used, it often indicates that commoning of some sort is happening. The field of free/open-source software for example is seen by its participating collaborators as a commons (of both protocol and digital code).



Cattle have been grazed on managed alpine meadow commons in Switzerland for hundreds of years without depleting the resource.

what are the benefits?

People: a commons furnishes subsistence and well-being for its members. All participants have the same rights to enjoy the commons. Indigenous commons are essential for survival. In industrial societies, 'commoned' global designs can mean cheap, low-carbon, local production.

Community / society: stewarding of commons requires people to interact & negotiate – it builds community. Democracy, anti-authoritarianism and mutual aid are the norm. Common protocols can mean that software can be allowed to control some things, and to give everyone equivalent tools and access. Common superstructures – of values, language, aesthetics – can mean much activity becomes unselfconscious, a kind of dance. Curating (producing and identifying good, proper stuff to contribute to a commons) is a powerful humane and collective vision.

Nature: is nowadays treated as an unregulated pool to be exploited by individuals motivated by self-interest. Companies and countries compete for natural resources and ways to dump waste. The material world is interconnected & complex, needing to be stewarded in commons, rather than extracted by individualist persons, corporations and nations. Newer matter-manipulating technologies such as nuclear, nanotech or gene tech go beyond the scope of everyday unaided vision – just like biosphere damage has done – and potentially can deeply disrupt 'ordinary life'. Discovering how to develop these under commons regulation is a profound challenge; the state and the market have spectacularly failed to recognise and prevent ecological damage. Commoning doesn't have 'externalities' – commons affect the life of everyone, and every aspect of life. Commoning is a way to bring human need and ecosystem stability into an aware mutual relationship.



Fablabs (fab as in fabrication): venues equipped with 'open hardware' – workspace, tools and machinery (including 3D printers).

what can I do?

So many kinds of things can be commoned; a person might participate in one, ten or dozens of projects. Commoning can penetrate many aspects of life – it can weave an entire way of life for change and well-being. The commons have to be produced; they don't sit there waiting to be commoned, or 'restored'. Experiment, exchange insights and discover how to common the three classes of means of subsistence and well-being: land, means of exchange and coordination / labour power. Be a commoner! Constantly ask: Why isn't this a commons? How can it be?

Natural infrastructure (land / 'wild commons'): support indigenous commons; buy Fair Trade; join and support organisations that campaign for commoned regulation of 'wild' resources; bring commodity land into enduring common ownership and construct commons of housing and land use, via community land trusts.

Economic infrastructure: money - use credit unions, local currencies and mutual credit. With mutual credit, we can build a global Credit Commons that takes the control of money from banks – replacing currency with credit and commoning the means of exchange. Get involved in peer-to-peer production, including Linux operating systems, Wikipedia, Fablabs etc.

Cultural superstructure: labour power, cultural commons – inc. public-domain resources like the findings of science, works of literature, news feeds; knowledge commons; plus some things that are 'almost commons' – massive online open courses (MOOCs) and open access journals.

Digital Commoning

Digital media and means are very important in how activists organise, how commoning can be done across distributed commons, and what needs to be commoned. Software code, algorithm-steered systems, digital media, etc. constitute a prominent present-day still-emergent kind of material that can be commoned.

The internet and the web: the world-wide web could have been a commons, and many who work in the software and web sphere remain committed to the principles of P2P-commons in software code, digital data and digital processing capacity.

Enclosing digital commons: Microsoft enclosed an emergent software code commons: GitHub.

Social media: plus tools, platforms. Track ongoing developments in distributed P2P protocols, apps and platforms - for example...

Wikis: wiki and its younger cousin fedwiki are forms of P2P commons in digital media. They're important, as digital 'means-for-knowing-with', that are open, collaborative and peer-to-peer.

resources

- lowimpact.org/commoning for much more info, contacts, articles, links & books, including:
- Bollier & Helfrich, *Free, Fair & Alive*
- Bauwens, Kostakis & Pazaitis, *Peer to Peer: the Commons Manifesto*
- Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*
- primer.commonstransition.org: primer
- bollier.org: news & perspectives
- p2pfoundation.net: research and promotion
- wiki.p2pfoundation.net: commons wiki
- creditcommons.net: commoning money



WIKIPEDIA

Wikipedia is possibly the world's most successful example of commoning. 6 million articles in English alone, and v. accurate.

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 220+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials. Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.

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