

Conservation

Classroom Resources

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“ We could be witnessing the beginning of the final enclosure of the world’s unfenced lands. ”



What Tragedy? Whose Commons?

By Fred Pearce

Pastoralist PR is dreadful. In the classic cautionary tale, communal land ownership inevitably leads to overgrazing. But maybe the story’s got it wrong.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

[worksheet available online](#)

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1. What are three major shifts in Bedouin culture that have occurred in modern times? (answer: 1. Less nomadic, more sedentary, homes in villages, 2. Selling camels and owning sheep, 3. Income from jobs in business or government rather than livestock)
2. According to estimates, do common pastures or farmland occupy more land across the globe? How much more? (answer: Pastures! Some estimates say 45% of the planet’s land surface - approaching 4X more land than farms)
3. What do pastoralists do to remain flexible in a changing environment? (answer: altering the size of their herds and migrating to areas where the vegetation is best that year)



4. Outline the progression of land ownership in the Ethiopian Oromia. (answer: First was community ownership of the land – 1961 government fenced off the Awash National Park – then Dutch company “took” land for a sugar estate, then big ranches – 2008 government “gave” and Indian company land for more sugar. Overall loss of Oromo land about 60%)
5. What are the two major opposing opinions given about the ownership of communal open lands in Africa? (answer: 1. National governments own the land, not pastoralists, and that pastoralists damage the land by overgrazing. 2. Native pastoralists owned the land and were careful stewards of the land until they were forced into smaller areas, restricted by national boundaries, and encouraged to live a more sedentary lifestyle. Governments and businesses illegally took their land and are damaging it.)
6. What are the two activities that the author says could be the major causes of environmental decline of the grasslands? (answer: overgrazing and the establishment of farms)
7. List three arguments for the preservation of the pastoralist community ownership.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

[worksheet available online](#)

1. What is your reaction to: “The Bedouin are settling down to a less noble, but more profitable, existence.”? Is your reaction based on first-hand familiarity with such a community such as this? What are the Bedouin giving up by leading a less-nomadic lifestyle? What are they gaining?
2. We often hear in conservation science that you should eat lower on the food chain in order to have a lower impact on the environment (e.g. “it takes 10x the fossil fuels to produce a calorie of animal food as it does to produce plant food”). Does this argument clash with the author’s argument that productive pastures and grazing is good for the environment?
3. Read and discuss the original “Tragedy of the Commons” argument by G. Hardin (1968), *Science* **162** (3859): 1243–1248. Do you know of historical or personal accounts on either side of the argument?

TRUE STORY: A woman joins the Peace Corps and heads to Africa full of optimism and motivation to change the world for the better and to personally help improve people’s lives. She settles in a rural village that has gone from a traditionally nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary one. Each

BUILD YOUR OWN GLOSSARY

- ▶ pastoralist
- ▶ Pleistocene landscapes
- ▶ global commons
- ▶ customary land tenure

family has claimed a patch of land and works to expand that land into farmland as fast as possible for both subsistence and for profit. The local forests are being decimated to make way for corn and other crops. The young woman determines that the best way to solve the human and environmental problem is to have a centralized, communal organization of the garden and crop activities. After many town meetings, the families agree, and construction on a centralized, regulated garden begins. One year later, the garden is doing well and the woman is starting to feel proud of her accomplishments. Then one day she stumbles onto a newly cleared patch of forest. Confused, she begins to explore the village. She soon finds out that every one of the families has secretly continued to farm and expand their personal plots at the same rate as they had before her arrival. When confronted, they admit that they either hadn't been sure if the plan for a communal organization would work and they didn't want their families to suffer financially, or they had viewed the idea as a good way to get ahead of the other families.

What lessons should be taken from this story? What are the essential elements that made the community in this story different from the pastoralists that are having positive effects on the environment? Is it possible to avoid a tragedy of the commons such as this? Are there certain conditions that must be met, or community characteristics that must be in present in order to avoid a tragedy of the commons?

4. What is your reaction to: "Pastoralism is the best way of managing the fickle climate of the dry grasslands of Africa and elsewhere... In places like the Badia, it is the spread of the plow—especially in the hands of outsiders—that is the real threat, both because it obliterates the natural grasslands and because it hems in cattle herders and shepherds."
5. What is your reaction to the way that the author writes about groups such as the Tuareg, and how, in essence, they have been forced to turn to violence due to their pastoral lifestyles being taken away?
6. The author states that many of Africa's political leaders were born in rural communities. Considering this, why is it that they have such zeal for changing these communities? Is it that they have thirst for modernization, wealth, and political power that could be gained by industrializing the land? Is it that they do not recognize the environmental and economic benefits of pastoralists? Is it that they hated the lifestyle that they were born into and want provide those communities with a better standard of living? Do you think that people from developed nations romanticize the humble way of life of pastoralists and forest dwellers? How does your opinion bear on your reaction to the statement that we could be approaching the "final extinction of customary land rights"?
7. Do you think that these common lands under debate are "owned under customary norms and used in accordance custom for shifting cultivation, grazing, hunting, wood and non-wood extraction, or as spare land for expanding farming



“ Far from wrecking the land, pastoralists and their animals have for thousands of years conserved biodiversity, held back the desert, stored carbon, and prevented erosion. ”

when needed,” as stated by Alden Wily, or are they “the world’s last great reserve of underused land,” as stated by the World Bank?

8. What are “Pleistocene landscapes”? If this is what conservationists strive for, why are they trying to build reserves where grazing isn’t allowed? Is it because they don’t think pastoralists will be good stewards of the land? Is there a way to allow such activity to continue in a sustainable way in the face of economic and cultural forces?
9. What is the author referring to when he writes, “As we saw in Ghana, tribal chiefs can be as venal as government ministers when a foreigner comes calling with a checkbook.” Do you know of success stories of natural resources recovering when the ownership is given to local resource extractors (e.g. fisheries, trapping, hunting)? How about examples of failures where the tragedy of the commons plays out?

ADVANCED ACTIVITIES

- 1. Debate:** Delve into the debate between the two activities that might be leading to the degradation of grasslands. What is the scientific evidence damning or supporting either side? Can we look to other regions (e.g. the American Midwest) for scientific evidence? Who are the major entities on either side? Which entities have more resources (e.g. money, lawyers, political leverage, etc.) to put behind their arguments?
- 2. Alternate Strategies for Environmental Stewardship:** Can activities be good for the economy AND good for the environment? Is there a difference in what is good for the local environment versus the global environment? Compare the environmental benefits from eating lower on the food chain with the environmental benefits from pastoralist activities cited in the article. Use the Oromia as an example: what goods and services did they traditionally supply the country? What industries have moved in, and where does the profit go? What costs does the shift in industry impose on the environment? What costs does the shift in industry impose on the government?
- 3. Explore the Science Supporting Pastoralism:** Read the report from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. What is the evidence showing conservation of biodiversity, holding back the desert, storing carbon, and preventing erosion?
- 4. Who Legally Owns the Land?:** Some entities in this story claim that historical tribal land legally belonged to the Pastoralists (e.g. the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research). What is the legal support for this position versus the position of the governments? What legal support is there to the claim

that governments have “given away” land “illegally”? Where do we see other examples of community ownership failing or working? (HINT: The Ejido system in Mexico where some areas are still under community ownership but others have been privatized.)

- 5. Historical Perspectives:** How has land ownership changed in Africa? Choose a region or country and research how the political/land-ownership story has evolved from pre-colonization to today (e.g. from community to colony to socialism to privatization).

