



Chapter 1

# What Is the Commons?

# What, Really, Is the Commons?

*It's what we own together, and how we work together to make things happen*

WELCOME TO THE COMMONS.

The term may be unfamiliar, but the idea has been around for centuries. The commons is a new use of an old word, meaning “what we share”—and it offers fresh hope for a saner, safer, more enjoyable future.

The commons refers to a wealth of valuable assets that belong to everyone. These range from clean air to wildlife preserves; from the judicial system to the Internet. Some are bestowed to us by nature; others are the product of cooperative human creativity. Certain elements of the commons are entirely new—think of Wikipedia. Others are centuries old—like colorful words and phrases from all the world’s languages.

Anyone can use the commons, so long as there is enough left for everyone else. This is why finite commons, such as natural resources, must be sustainably and equitably managed. But many other forms of the commons can be freely tapped. Today’s hip-hop and rock stars, for instance, “appropriate” (quote) the work of soul singers, jazz swingers, blues wailers, gospel shouters, hillbilly pickers, and balladeers going back a long time—and we are all richer for it. That’s

the greatest strength of the commons. It’s an inheritance shared by all humans, which increases in value as people draw upon its riches.

At least that’s how the commons has worked throughout history, fostering democratic, cultural, technological, medical, economic, and humanitarian advances. But this natural cycle of sharing is now under assault. As the market economy becomes the yardstick for measuring the worth of everything, more people are grabbing portions of the commons as their private property. Many essential elements of society—from ecosystems to scientific knowledge to public services—are slipping through our hands and into the pockets of the rich and powerful.

## The Wealth We Lost

One example of what we’re losing comes right out of today’s headlines about spiraling health care costs. The creation of many widely prescribed drugs, which millions of people depend upon, was funded in large part by government grants. But the exclusive

right to sell pharmaceuticals developed with public money was handed over to drug companies with almost nothing asked in return. That means we pay exorbitant prices for medicine developed with our tax dollars, and many poor people are denied access to treatments that might save their lives.

Another even more absurd example concerns a subject that you would think stirs no controversy—yoga. Through centuries of evolution as a spiritual practice, any new yoga poses or techniques were automatically incorporated into the tradition for everyone to use. But beginning in 1978 an Indian named Bikram Choudhury, now based in Beverly Hills, copyrighted certain long-used hatha yoga poses and sequences as his own invention, Bikram Yoga, and he now threatens other yoga studios teaching these techniques with lawsuits.

The good news is that people all around us are beginning to take back the commons.

Neighbors rising up to keep their library open, improve their park, or find new funding for public schools. Greens fighting the draining of wetlands and the dumping of toxic waste in inner-city neighborhoods. Digital activists providing access to the Internet in poor communities and challenging corporate plans to limit access to information. Indigenous people instilling their children with a sense of tradition and hope. Young social entrepreneurs and software engineers seeking new mechanisms for people to share ideas.

Not all of these people think of themselves as commons activists. Some may not even be familiar with the term. Vel Wiley, the longtime director of Milwaukee's public access TV channels, stood up at a commons event and declared, "When I was asked to be a part of this conference, I thought the commons was for people like Greenpeace, an environmental cause. But I understand



*The sky, the earth, parklands, scientific knowledge, and even the Internet belong to all of us.*

now that I have been advocating for the commons over the last twenty years. I realize we're not just a small group advocating that the people have a voice in the broadcasting media. We're all a part of something so much bigger, and that helps us to keep going."

It's not necessary that everyone adopt the word *commons*. What matters is that people understand that what we share together (and how we share it) is as important as what we possess individually.

### Parallels to the Origins of Environmentalism

Growing interest in the commons today resembles the origins of the environmental movement in the 1960s. At that time, there was little talk about ecology or the greening of anything. There was, however, a lot of concern about air pollution, pesticides, litter, the loss of wilderness, declining wildlife populations, the death of Lake Erie, toxic substances oozing into rivers, oil spills fouling the oceans, lead paint poisoning inner-city kids, suburbia swallowing up the countryside, mountains of trash piling up in landfills, and unsustainable farming practices ravaging the land. Yet the word *environment* did not become a household word until the first Earth Day—April 22, 1970. Bringing an assortment of issues together under the banner of environmentalism highlighted the connections between what until then had been seen as separate causes and fueled the unexpected growth of

the environmental movement over the next few years.

The commons offers the same promise of uniting people concerned about the common good in many forms into a new kind of movement that reshapes how people think about the nature of ownership and the importance of collaboration in modern society.

### A New Way of Thinking and Living

More than just a philosophical and political framework for understanding what's gone wrong, the commons furnishes us a toolkit for fixing problems. Local activists eager to revitalize their community and protect open space are setting up land trusts—a form of community ownership distinct from both private property and government management. Savvy Web users use the cooperative properties of the Internet to challenge corporations who want to undermine this shared resource by fencing it off for private gain. Villagers and city dwellers around the world assert that water is a commons, which cannot be sold, depleted, or controlled by anyone.

These kinds of efforts extend the meaning of the commons beyond something you own to a bigger idea: how we live together. Peter Linebaugh, a preeminent historian of the commons, has coined the word "commoning" to describe the growing efforts he sees to protect and strengthen the things we share. "I want to stress the point that

## What Is a Commons-Based Society?

*A new way of life that values what we share  
as much as what we own*

A commons-based society refers to a shift in policies and values away from the market-based system that has dominated modern society for the past two hundred years, with a particular vengeance in the past thirty. A commons-based society would place as much emphasis on social justice, democratic participation, and environ-

mental protection as on economic competitiveness and private property. Market-based solutions would be valuable tools in a commons-based society, as long as they do not undermine the workings of the commons itself.

—Jay Walljasper

the commons is an activity rather than just a material resource,” he says. “That brings in the essential social element of the commons.”

David Bollier, one of the leading theorists of the commons on the international stage, has defined the term as a social dynamic. “A commons arises whenever a given community decides it wishes to manage a resource in a collective manner, with special regard for equitable access, use and sustainability. It is a social form that has long lived in the shadows of our market culture, and now is on the rise,” he wrote in the British political journal *Renewal*.

Julie Ristau and Alexa Bradley, community organizers with extensive experience, find that many people have internalized the competitive ethos of the market mentality so fully that they believe any cooperative action is doomed to fail. They’re losing the ability

to even think of working together. Yet at the same time, Ristau and Bradley detect in others “a broad yearning for hope, connection, and restoration. We see a remarkable array of efforts to reconstitute community, to relocalize food, to move toward cooperative economics, to better harmonize our lives with the health of our planet. These efforts spring from a deep human need and desire for different ways of interacting and organizing resources that will help us reconstitute our capacity for shared ownership, collaboration, and stewardship.”

Growing numbers of people are taking steps that move us, gradually, in the direction of a commons-based society—a world in which the fundamental focus on competition that characterizes life today would be balanced with new attitudes and social structures that foster cooperation. This vision is emerging at precisely the point we

need it most. Deeply held myths of the last thirty years about the magic of the market have been shattered by the implosion of the global financial bubble, creating both an opening and an acute need for different ways of living.

To deliver us from current economic and ecological calamities will require more than administering a few tweaks to the operat-

ing system that runs our society. A complete retooling is needed—a paradigm shift that revises the core principles that guide our culture top to bottom. At this historical moment, the commons vision of a society where “we” matters as much as “me” shines as a beacon of hope for a better world.

—Jay Walljasper

## COMMONS SENSE

# Why Should We Care About the Commons Today?

*Yes, it's history. But also our best hope for the future*

Both the idea and the reality of the commons have been declining since at least the eighteenth century. Why now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, should we struggle to revive them?

The simple answer is that we have to.

Despite the many benefits it brings us, the economic market operates like a runaway truck. It has no internal mechanism telling it when to stop—stop depleting the commons that sustain










it. To put it another way, we've been living off a fat commons bank account for centuries, and now it's running low. We must start making some deposits so we'll have something for tomorrow.

If our old Manifest Destiny was to carve up the commons, our new task is to rebuild it. We must do this to protect the planet, enhance our quality of life, reduce inequality, and leave a better world for our children.

—Peter Barnes

# Where to Find the Commons

*From DNA to dance steps, it's all around*

-  Air & water
-  The Internet
-  Parks, libraries, streets, & sidewalks
-  Our DNA
-  Blood banks, soup kitchens, twelve-step groups,  
museums, nonprofit organizations
-  Dance steps & fashion trends
-  Social Security, the National Weather Service,  
police protection & other public services
-  Fishing & hunting
-  The airwaves (radio, television, cell phone)

- Christmas, Halloween, Passover, Ramadan, Mardi Gras, & all holiday traditions
- Poker, hopscotch, & soccer
- Biodiversity
- Taxpayer-funded medical & scientific research
- Wikipedia
- Robin Hood, Athena, & the Little Mermaid
- Sushi, pizza, tamales, & family recipes
- The jump shot, kimonos, bookkeeping systems, & the Heimlich maneuver
- Public education, public transportation, & other public services
- Open-source software
- Jokes, fairy tales, slang, & anecdotes
- The oceans, Antarctica, & outer space