

THE EARTHBOUND REPORT

Elinor Ostrom's 8 Rules For Managing The Commons

by [Jeremy Williams](#) January 15, 2018

The commons are those [things that we all own together](#), that are neither privately owned, nor managed by the government on our behalf. Some are large scale and somewhat abstract, such as the English language. Others are local and more tangible, such as fishing rights, and they need more careful management. Our current political paradigm is sceptical of the commons: if nobody takes responsibility for something, it will inevitably be abused. So either it needs to be in private hands, or run by public institutions.

There are good examples of commons though – irrigation networks or pastures that have been managed by and for ordinary people for generations, and they're still functioning. There are also examples of wrecked pastures and over-exploited fishing grounds, failed commons where a resource was mismanaged and destroyed. [Elinor Ostrom](#) studied both kinds, and drew up a list of principles for running the commons. I read them recently in [Derek Wall's book on her work](#), and they're worth sharing.

- 1. Commons need to have clearly defined boundaries.** In particular, who is entitled to access to what? Unless there's a specified community of benefit, it becomes a free for all, and that's not how commons work.
- 2. Rules should fit local circumstances.** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to common resource management. Rules should be dictated by local people and local ecological needs.
- 3. Participatory decision-making is vital.** There are all kinds of ways to make it happen, but people will be more likely to follow the rules if they had a hand in writing them. Involve as many people as possible in decision-making.
- 4. Commons must be monitored.** Once rules have been set, communities need a way of checking that people are keeping them. Commons don't run on good will, but on accountability.
- 5. Sanctions for those who abuse the commons should be graduated.** Ostrom observed that the commons that worked best didn't just ban people who broke the rules. That tended to create resentment. Instead, they had systems of warnings and fines, as well as informal reputational consequences in the community.

6. Conflict resolution should be easily accessible. When issues come up, resolving them should be informal, cheap and straightforward. That means that anyone can take their problems for mediation, and nobody is shut out. Problems are solved rather than ignoring them because nobody wants to pay legal fees.

7. Commons need the right to organise. Your commons rules won't count for anything if a higher local authority doesn't recognise them as legitimate.

8. Commons work best when nested within larger networks. Some things can be managed locally, but some might need wider regional cooperation – for example an irrigation network might depend on a river that others also draw on upstream.

The 'tragedy of the commons' is real, but it is not inevitable. It is possible to create and operate thriving commons, a third way besides private ownership and government control. In an age where we all depend on global commons such as the atmosphere or the oceans, we should be paying more attention to commons management.