



Activity - Tragedy of the Commons

The resources on overpopulation helped you to consider the strain placed on resources by a growing population. Garrett Hardin used some Malthusian-style principles to put forward his theory of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' (1968), which is widely studied in Geography undergraduate courses.

Task 1:

Read his original paper below and try to summarise the main arguments that Hardin puts forward. Don't worry about the complex equations, try and select a few key points and work out what Hardin is trying to say:

<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/162/3859/1243.full>

In essence, Hardin argues that every resource, for example a piece of grazing land, has a carrying capacity (e.g. a patch of land can support 20 cows or one field can feed 10 people). If this is breached, then degradation or a 'tragedy' will occur. A population increase might exacerbate this poor land management. Hardin thought that people were motivated to be selfish when managing land. The link below provides a great summary of his argument:

<http://www.nrdc.org/thisgreenlife/0601.asp>

So Hardin uses as an example a patch of land over which several people have grazing rights. As the costs of grazing the land are shared by all the owners, each individual person will want to add more and more of their own individual animals to that land, since the costs are spread evenly between people, but the benefit to their specific animal belongs to the individual. Hardin assumes that people are selfish and will continue to add animals until the area is overgrazed. What do you think of Hardin's assumption that people are motivated by self-interest? Are communities of people inherently selfish? Watch this video which illustrates how people can be motivated by greed when offered the chance to share rewards:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKaYRH6E36U>

If you think of any criticisms of Hardin's assumption that people are inherently selfish, check out Activity 4 for more information. Criticisms of Hardin's theory are much-talked about in Geography, so if you are thinking of studying this subject at undergraduate level, then some in-depth research on this topic would be useful.