



Activity - Drama of the Commons

While Hardin's theory of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' is still widely talked about in Geography, scholars have demonstrated that it contains several flaws. One of the most famous scholars to criticise Hardin is Elinor Ostrom.

Task 1:

Read the article below and find out more about what she said, including a case study of land management in a Swiss village. Perhaps she will talk about some of the criticisms that you thought of when reading Hardin's original article in Activity 3. Ostrom thought that land management was more of a 'drama' instead of always ending in 'tragedy':

<http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/elinor-ostroms-8-principles-managing-commmons>

Here's a great book review of Ostrom's famous book 'The Drama of the Commons', which summarises some key arguments:

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/global_environmental_politics/v003/3.1lee.html

Did Ostrom use any of the same arguments as you when criticising Hardin? Perhaps you immediately criticised Hardin's assumption that people are inherently selfish. Ostrom did this and suggested that communities were able to talk to each other and work together to solve problems. So, for example, communities could recognise that a resource has a carrying capacity (i.e. the point at which further resource use leads to degradation) and work together to prevent overuse. They could do this by limiting access to resources, setting up structures to monitor this, and fine people who abuse the system.

Task 2:

Can you think of any criticisms of Ostrom's work? For example, some scholars agree that systems can be set up to manage small-scale resources. But what about global common resources like the atmosphere and ocean? Isn't it more difficult to set up global agreements here to manage resources carefully, and stop problems like climate change?

Task 3:

As a final task, try and make links between the resources on Malthus and Hardin, particularly in the question that was asked at the end of Activity 2. Despite both



theories being criticised, both are widely talked about today. Why do you think that is? Read the following article to help form your opinion:

<http://www.thesocialcontract.com/pdf/four-three/monbiot.pdf>

Monbiot argues that the Kenyan government used some of Hardin's ideas to legitimise interfering in the affairs of local communities. Do you think that Hardin's and Malthus' theories are used by particular actors to hide more serious problems? Remember Satterthwaite's article in resource 2 on overpopulation. He found that it was Western consumption patterns that caused environmental degradation, not overpopulation. Therefore, do you think that Western nations and other powerful actors across the world use such ideas to hide their own failures and blame others instead?