

Ethics of Overpopulation and the Tragedy of the Commons

Caroline Ferguson

The Tragedy of Overpopulation

In his 1968 essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Garrett Hardin argues that individuals acting rationally in their own self-interest will deplete a common pool resource. The commons is defined as goods that are rivalrous and non-excludable. They are rivalrous because the enjoyment or exploitation by one person directly diminishes the enjoyment by another person (e.g. if a fisherman removes one fish from the ocean, there is one less fish for others to catch). The commons are non-excludable in that everyone has free and equal access to them (e.g. anyone with a boat can catch a fish). In such a situation, degradation of the resource is inevitable because an individual receives the full benefit of consuming an additional unit, but the costs of doing so are distributed across society as a whole. The theory of the tragedy of the commons is regularly applied to resource management, but Hardin uses it to address the much larger and overarching problem of overpopulation. The “commons” in this case includes any and all resources necessary to sustaining modern life. The tragedy is that individuals enjoy all the benefits of having one additional child, but society must bear the costs of one additional consumer.

The tragedy of the commons has historically been successfully resolved by restricting or limiting access. In the case of the fishery, we might restrict the number of fish one boat can catch or create a quota for all fishermen and sell permits to catch some percentage of the total. These restrictions, though controversial and sometimes difficult to enforce, ensure that the fishery will be sustained for future generations. Hardin identifies that our current human population management structure, or rather lack thereof, will inevitably result in a socially suboptimal population size. Though each parent will benefit from their children – whether the benefit be extra hands on the farm, extra wages from the factory, having caretakers in old age, or simply pride and purpose – society will be responsible for their food, education, health care, and welfare. There are few individual incentives to limit breeding, so Hardin proposes that society introduce coercive laws to incentivize people to have fewer children. Placing a tax on all children after the first and second (replacement rate) or paying families with no more than two children would discourage large families without prohibiting them. According to Hardin, “freedom to

breed will bring ruin to all,” and if that is indeed the case, we must limit some personal liberties in order to preserve the greater good, just as we preserve a fishery by limiting fishermen’s use of the fishing commons.

Overpopulation is Neither a Direct nor an Immediate Threat

Hardin’s radical solution to overpopulation, the limiting of “breeding,” might be necessary if overpopulation were a direct and immediate threat to the well-being of humans and of the planet. However, there are two reasons this is not the case: (1) unequal distribution of resources, not overpopulation, is responsible for scarcities, and (2) development shrinks family size over a fairly short timescale.

- (1) *Overpopulation is not a direct threat.* Hardin, like Malthus before him, worries that population growth will outpace food production; however, since the Green Revolution, the trend of food output per person “has been firmly upward” (Sen, 7). We produce more than enough food to feed the world, yet one in eight people suffer from chronic hunger (FAO 2013, 1). About one-third of the food we produce globally for human consumption goes to waste every day (FAO 2011, 4). A similar, though perhaps less dramatic, trend can be shown for many natural resources. Excess in the developed world is paired with scarcity in the developing world. Reducing family size in places like Sub-Saharan Africa would do little to resolve food insecurity. What is instead needed is a reduction in waste, an increase in efficiency, and a more equitable distribution of necessary goods.
- (2) *Overpopulation is not an immediate threat.* If population required immediate reduction, family planning might be our only option. But as I have enumerated above, population is not, at present, so large that we cannot produce enough life-supporting resources to sustain every person alive. The rate of population growth is already declining, and population is expected to stabilize naturally as economies develop and families enter the middle class (Sen, 6). Development – and with it education, health care, opportunities for women, and political and economic stability – over time reduces fertility rates (Sen, 11). The world is not currently facing a population crisis, and there is time to allow for development to naturally lower birth rates without infringing upon the basic human right to have children.

Works Cited

Gustavsson, Jenny, et al. *Global food losses and food waste*. Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2011.

Hardin, Garrett. "The tragedy of the commons." *New York* (1968).

Sen, Amartya. "Population: delusion and reality." *The New York Review of Books* 41.15 (1994): 62-71.

The State of Food Insecurity in the World: Executive Summary. Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2013.