



Justice Rising

Grassroots Solutions to Corporate Domination

Reclaiming the Commons: From the Jaws of Corporate Privatization

by Jim Tarbell

Corporations are like fire. By form and function they consume all in their path. It is not a moral issue; it is their programming. Classical economists who wrote the theoretical rules of the capitalist economic system served at the pay of corporate masters, mainly in political opposition to the landed aristocracy. They constructed an economic framework which said that all economic activity was created by combining land, labor and capital. They valued the limited capital stock and devalued the seemingly limitless treasures of the earth. In one fell swoop, they also institutionalized the commodification of all humans and the magical systems of nature.

In 1968 Garrett Hardin wrote the *Tragedy of the Commons*, which postulates that the natural Commons will be destroyed if all humans are allowed to take from them what they want without regard to the carrying capacity of the natural Commons. Over the past two centuries many people have questioned the economic appropriation of these Commons. They realized that the invisible hand devised by the classical economists did not account for the cost of harm to the natural commons and that flaw would eventually destroy the planet. "Okay, okay," said the classical economists, "so there are things external to the market, but we can take care of that with taxes." And an economist named Pigou postulated in 1920 that the government, in its wisdom and responsibility to protect the public good and uphold the public trust, could accurately calculate the costs of factors external to the market and tax the perpetrators that were generating these costs to society, be it pollution, social turmoil or destruction of habitat.

The problem is that classical economics does not recognize that our biosphere has a finite carrying capacity. Population and consumption can not keep growing. The solution to this problem, and Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, is to manage the commons at a sustainable level of population and consumption. Pigou's taxes still depend on the invisible hand and an honest government. But as Herman Daly and John Cobb write, the invisible hand does not recognize the importance of the biosphere's carrying capacity. The invisible hand only creates, "the best possible adjustments to an ever worsening situation." In this era when the costs of ecological disasters are incalculable, our planetary carrying capacity has passed its limits and a corrupt campaign finance system gives overwhelming influence to the perpetrators destroying the commons, depending on Pigou taxes is a joke.

The corporate fire will consume all unless we insure the wise management and permanent protection of the natural Commons' carrying capacity and our ability to achieve a stable level of population and consumption within that carrying capacity.

This issue of *Justice Rising* is about creating a movement to make sure the Commons are protected. Many people have taken on this project in disparate efforts all across the planet. Now is the time for them to come together in one movement. As the extent of

the corporate ravages of the commons becomes more obvious with every ecological disaster, this movement becomes more possible.

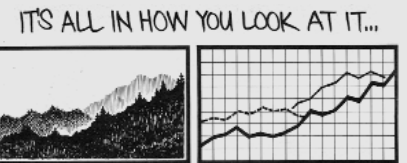
Be like Jan Edwards who has been a tremendous help with this edition of *Justice Rising* and educate our fellow citizens about the pattern of privatization that is more than a local aberration.

Join the brigade and put out the fire. Life depends on it.



graphic: Peter Veres

Commons" legally refers to common property, but should the Natural Commons be property or are they something else? Are they simply and elegantly nature? Were the classical economists wrong to commodify them as one of the factors of production?



graphic: John Chamberlain

This issue of *Justice Rising* begins an in-depth look at the Commons. The next issue will be on Water, the many aspects of its existence and the corporate drive to claim it as commodified private property.

Many questions are raised in an investigation of the Commons. Central among them is the question of ownership. One thrust of the burgeoning movement to protect the Commons posits that we own the Natural Commons as individuals. By using market mechanisms, the invisible hand and a modified Pigou Tax they say we can be compensated for depredations and usage of the Natural Commons and that the market will take care of the management. Others view this as impractical. The growing body of ecological economics suggest that the external costs to society of a tragedy like global warming are incalculable and that the invisible hand is impractical. They insist that land and nature be looked at in a whole new framework as energy and biosphere.

Jan Edwards in this issue proposes that nature should have an entirely new constitutional designation, not property, not person, just nature, with constitutional rights. These are the matters that a movement to reclaim the Commons has to answer. A global management scenario has to be created so that energy, the biosphere and all of life can go on forever. Let us know your thoughts on this issue and join us in our next issue of *Justice Rising* on water. We welcome all contributions. The deadline for submissions is April 16.