

Managing Human Behavior in the Global Commons: Space, Atmosphere, Oceans, Antarctica

by Harlan Cleveland

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Now that the actions of human beings clearly outweigh the slower evolution of nature in the global scheme of things, we need to think of the global environment not as a market or as a battlefield, but as a commons. The remedies for Earth's newly diagnosed degenerative disease are not only global; they are also behavioral. And the need to manage human impacts on the global commons will now literally require hundreds of millions of people, not just rooms full of experts and political leaders, to do something or to stop doing something.

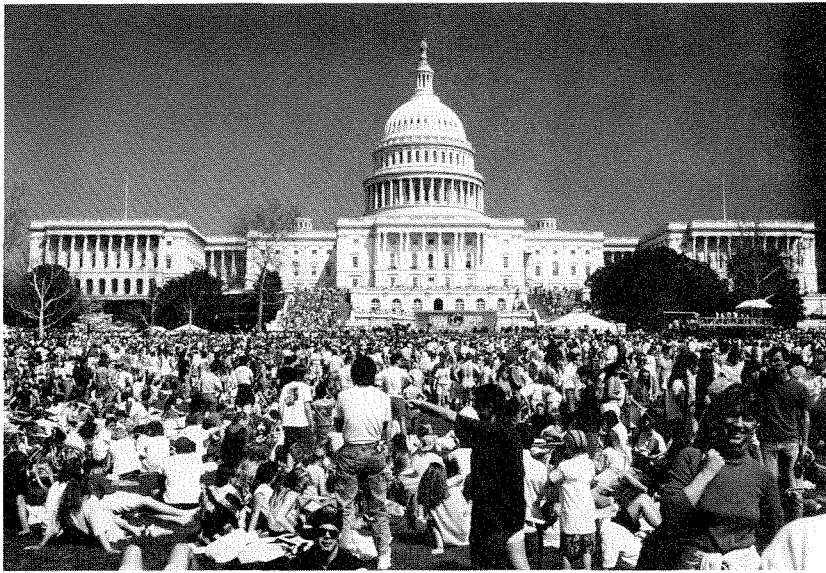
The core of the global commons is those four enormous environments, still mostly unexplored, which are already treated in international law, custom, and practice as belonging to nobody and therefore to everybody: outer space, the atmosphere, the oceans, and Antarctica. They are geophysically and biochemically related to each other, and are close cousins also in the human psyche. They are for all practical purposes indivisible; they are bounded by each other; they affect each other's behavior. Indeed, in the case of the atmosphere and outer space, it is hard to tell when one stops and the other begins.

In all four environments the future depends crucially on what we the peoples of the United Nations do, and stop doing, next. So, in all four environments we are moving by fits and starts toward a remarkably commonsensical idea: that our inherited wisdom about ownership and property rights and national sovereignty simply does not apply. It's consequently unwise to export into the global commons the laws and customs and practices we've learned to work with on dry land.

The framework for international politics, security, trade, finance, and the movement of peoples is solidly based on who owns what. In such a framework real estate and artifacts are exchanged. Even people—individual hostages, spies, prisoners of war, sometimes whole populations—are exchanged for all the world as if they were property belonging to someone. But the four environments that make up the global economy cannot by their nature be bought and sold, given or received, yielded up, seized, or appropriated. They have to be shared. And for sharing environments we do not yet have either a solid body of law or a settled theory of political economy. That's why conflict and competition, the laws of war, and the traditions of rugged enterprise are simply not very useful in thinking about the sustainability of the global commons. It's the reason why in the shared environments, notions such as commonwealth and community will have to come into vogue, not only for the reordering of the local human relations in our own community, but for deciding what we do or stop doing about the iciest and wettest parts of our planet, about the air we breathe, the sunlight that gives us life, and the heavens through which we hurtle our serious way toward purpose or oblivion.

While we're jettisoning concepts that may inhibit fresh thinking, I suggest, with apologies to the organizers of this wonderful symposium, we take a sharp look at *sustainable*, that buzzword of the 1990s. *Sustainable* is becoming a status quo word—a justification of things as they are. Our purpose in the global commons should not





Earth Day 1990 brought out the largest grass-roots demonstration in history—200 million people in 140 countries. Here a U.S. contingent assembles in front of the Capitol.

be just to keep it from further degradation at human hands, not just to protect it from ourselves. Certainly we have to protect the commons from becoming humanity's littered backyard, its waste-disposal dump. But the real tragedy of this newly perceived commons would be to leave it unexplored, to neglect its many potentials for contributing to human needs and purposes.

Part of the present tragedy of the commons is that we're not yet using what the global commons freely provides. The marvels of space satellites have not yet narrowed the gap between rich and poor. They mostly enable the affluent to work with each other more efficiently and prepare for more efficient sky-based killing fields. We're wasting the beneficent rays of the sun by not converting them into usable energy. We're neglecting the power still locked in the temperature difference between tropical sea surface and the ocean deeps. We're not yet using our biotechnological talent to maximize the riches inherent in the dense biomass and solar radiation available in such abundance in the so-called poor countries. They're not poor in bioresources, but poor in the capacity to use them. The word *sustainability* seems to bid us to hang onto what environment we have left. It's not nearly a dynamic enough word to generate a world-wide push for growth with fairness.

The good news about the global commons is not to be found by looking out to sea or up at the sky. Right here on land, very large crowds of educated people have decided that the global environment is worth shouting about. And very large crowds of educated people waving placards

cannot be ignored. That's the lesson that dictators and democratic leaders alike are learning these days—many by finding themselves suddenly unemployed. Beyond a certain size, enough to overflow a big city plaza, protesting crowds simply can't be subdued even by force. It was instructive in 1989 that Deng Xiaoping didn't move in on the students in Tienanmen Square until most of them had left. The fusion of education with frustration is obviously explosive. The Polish proletariat, Soviet scientists, workers and merchants and intellectuals throughout the world, from Hyundai auto workers to Moscow liberals, have all figured out how to create media events that mortify, in order to modify, established authority.

The biggest crowd so far—200 million people in 140 countries, almost certainly the largest grass-roots demonstration in history—came out on Earth Day 1990. Stay-at-homes could judge as trivial the televised images of local recycling, which were so much easier to photograph than the global atmosphere; they could jibe at the litter left behind by these crowds for someone else to clean up; they could wince at the spectacle here and there of half-naked young people with painted faces having fun in the sun.

Some even warned that Earth Day might do actual harm, by persuading folks that everything will be fine if we clean up our individual acts. But it *is* the acts of individuals and couples and households that produce the pervasive threat to the global environment. The poor and the rich are cooperating to destroy in different but mutually reinforcing ways the environment we share: innocent peasants cutting down trees; innocent couples having more babies than they can raise to be healthy and productive; innocent citizens thinking that government regulation and corporate responsibility are someone else's problem.

The policy shifts required to manage human behavior in the global commons, then, will mean wrenching change in government rule-making and corporate strategy. But established leaders of large organizations, public or private, will simply stand there until they feel the heat from people they care about—constituents, customers, employees, and their own educated children. The health of the global environment is the product of behavior by billions of individuals. And that's why it's good news that the crowds for environment have become just as large and demanding as the crowds for democracy have recently been—and even more global.

What should the crowds for environment be trying to get done? The problem is not to

manage the global commons. That would be an act of almost ridiculous presumption, as though with our limited knowledge, primitive models, and fuzzy horizons, we could rationalize the ocean's currents, modify the world's weather, and reorder the Newtonian logic of gravitation in outer space. No, the problem is to manage *human behavior* in the global commons, and this is where new forms of international cooperation could come in.

Should we impose our values on a mostly vacant commons? It's true that wherever we touch it, we affect what millions of years have wrought. The wilderness approach, driven by a paralyzing sense of our own ignorance, would say, "Don't touch!" But as a practical matter the commons won't be left alone, so the problem is to organize world consensus on regulating human behavior in ways that balance our appetite for adventure and our ambitions of expanding human civilization's physical frontiers with a healthy respect for the foul-up factor in every human enterprise.

Commons environments and the dangers of degradation and conflict that arise from them require that someone establish universal norms and standards. What actually happens, of course, will be up to hundreds of government agencies, thousands of companies, regulators, science academies, universities, laboratories, and advocacy groups, and ultimately up to millions of schoolteachers, hundreds of millions of householders and automobile owners, and billions of people trying to raise their living standards to match their expectations. The rules of governing human impacts on the global system have to appeal to large populations, which means that they have to be openly arrived at and that they have to seem as fair as any universal rule can be. That means that setting standards cannot be left only to the technologically strong—those with the prowess to despoil Antarctica, foul the world's seas, exploit the ocean's resources, damage the ozone shield, spew out global-warming gases, and sprinkle debris in outer space. The standard-setters will have to be agreed-upon surrogates for everyone who holds the global commons in trust for posterity.

Trust—there's a suggestive word. The United Nations originally set up a Trusteeship Council in parallel with the General Assembly and the Security Council. The Trusteeship Council presided over the decolonization of more than a billion people. Its success has now made it unemployed. It doesn't have the right membership or the right kind of staff for what I'm proposing, but it has the right name, and the

rest, I believe, can be fixed without amending the charter. Let's not open the charter itself for rewriting: We probably wouldn't do nearly as well in the nineties as the founders did in the forties.

The simplest way, after a negotiation rich in complexity, would be for the Trusteeship Council to form a special commission on the global commons to act as the trustee for our four great surrounding environments. The commission should be extra-national, that is, a collective executive appointed by regional groups of governments for terms of years, say five to seven. The commissioners would themselves act by consensus, not by voting; voting procedures are useful only for taking snapshots of disagreements. The new UN agency, which might come to be called the Trusteeship Commission, would negotiate norms and standards for exploring and exploiting the global commons and would keep the health of the commons environments under open and continuous review. Its guidelines could not be mandatory, but that's what would keep them from being arbitrary.

Much of the needed analytical and monitoring work could then be farmed out to other UN agencies and to nongovernmental corporations, environmental groups, universities, research labs, scientific academies, and international associations. Ultimately the success of any universal standards will rest on our educated behavior—on us, the peoples of the United Nations. This means that all the participants in this complex choreography will also have an inherent mandate to be educators, teaching about the kinds of human conduct that are compatible with life in shared environments. Children in every culture will need to grow up with a feel for what our planet and its environs, explored and exploited with care and concern, can do for human needs and purposes before Caltech is 200 years old. □

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