

Our “common” wealth

Sherman Tan, PMP, CSRS

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“Tragedy of the Commons” basically refers to the depletion of a shared resource by individuals, acting independently and rationally according to each one's self-interest, despite their understanding that depleting the common resource is contrary to the group's long-term best interests. In Hardin's paper, the shared resources could be air, water, natural vegetation, food supply, or even our dear mother earth.

As there are two sides of a coin, some criticised Hardin's theory as lacking in empirical evidence and argued that there are abundance of examples illustrating co-operations amongst users of “common” properties.

In reality, how many of us actually put common interest ahead of self-needs?

Look back and reflect when was the last time the common refrigerator or micro-oven in the office or dormitory pantry is in clean condition or when the beach has no left-over rubbish.

Even nature seems to encourage such selfish and self-centred behaviours. When I was studying molecular biotechnology, I learned cancer cells are “programmed” to colonise as much of the host they have infected knowing very well that they would perish if the host dies.

Again, there are many incidents happening around the world but at much larger scale – from the contamination of ground water through irresponsible disposal of toxic waste to the release of methane gas in Murray-Darling Basin², a river network sprawling across five Australian states due to coal-seam gas mining activities (fracking).

The largest and recent tragedy in South-East Asia was the regional haze in 2015 when Indonesia shot up to become the world's 3rd biggest polluters after the US and China by emitting over 1.4 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide through slash-and-burnt of peatland³.

Last week, 22 Apr 2016 was Earth Day⁴ and on this day, the Paris 2015 Climate Accord was signed but this agreement can be enforced only when 55 countries representing 55% of global Greenhouse gases emissions have formally joined it. The target date is set in 2020 but will this be achieved?

Closer to home is the depletion of water to critical levels of Lingui reservoir in Johore where Singapore draws water to meet up to 50% of Singapore's current water needs. To ally concern, the government outlined plans to build the island's 4th desalination plant. However, should we be curbing demand instead of trying to increase water supply?

Next month, Queen Elizabeth II celebrates her 90th birthday. Despite the downfall of the British through decolonisation, Queen Elizabeth II is currently the monarch of 16 members of the Commonwealth known as the Commonwealth Realm⁵. While these member states have no legal obligation to one another, they are united by language, history, culture and shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Maybe, the British government and Heads of those former colonized countries knew back in 1949 after the London Declaration⁶, the importance being associated with the Commonwealth or the need to protect our shared “common wealth”.

The writer is the Principal Consultant & Owner of Innovar Pte Ltd and a Director at EcoInvest (S) Pte Ltd

References:

¹ Tragedy of the Commons: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons

² Australian MP sets river on fire and then blames fracking: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/australian-mp-sets-river-on-fire-and-then-blames-fracking-a6998221.html>

³ Regional haze one of the worst in history: <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/3-regional-haze-one-of-the-worst-in-history>

⁴ Earth Day at EcoInvest Singapore: <https://www.facebook.com/EcoinvestSG>

⁵ Commonwealth Realm: http://www.wow.com/wiki/Commonwealth_realm

⁶ London Declaration: <http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/history-items/documents/London%20Declaration%20of%201949.pdf>