

Notes on IASC 2010 Regional Conf.
Phoenix, Ariz., Sept. 30-Oct.2/10
By Heather Menzies

I am still digesting what I learned at the IASC conference, and will report further when I've had a chance to read all the abstracts and papers that were included on a memory stick issued to all participants. But for the moment, I wish to share overall impressions, and some specifics, while the conference is still fresh in my mind.

A: Overall:

1. The commons is a term that seems to be gaining a lot of attention and currency these days, and is being applied in a number of rather diverse contexts, from irrigation, conservation and environmental regeneration to farmers' markets and international development projects. I also get the sense that one driver behind this is climate change coupled with the retreat of the state as an actor and regulator. So, as water, air and land are being degraded and biodiversity threatened in the face of environmental destruction, it seems that ordinary people will be left holding the bag.
2. Happily, there are inspiring initiatives going on all over the world where people are picking up the slack, and taking the initiative.
3. There's an impressive amount of international scholarship identifying what makes common-pool resource systems work, with trust, transparent communication and effective monitoring/sanctions being the most vital themes. Related to this, there's a growing body of research methods. I want to recommend certain books, journals and authors on different themes, such as governance and communication.
4. The presentations made at the conference were very academic, with a lot of very smart young graduate students doing excellent, very focussed presentations. There were always four theme streams going on at any given time, and the titles of these ranged from "ecosystem services", co-management, water-rights reform, irrigation, protected areas, Indigenous socio-economic enterprises, collective and property rights on the Western (cattle) range, fisheries, coastal commons, forest governance, experimental methods, cross-scale dynamics and community involvement.
5. I presented in the session on community involvement, and the other presenters are typical of the range of topics broached at the conference. One talked about stakeholder engagement in "strategic environmental assessment," used as a planning tool. Another talked about the difference between institutions and organizations. And a third questioned what makes farmers' markets sustainable as participative "socio-ecological systems." My presentation on the Gabriola Commons was very well received, eliciting lots of questions (esp. re. Sharing resources and sanctions to complement trust) and prompting the suggestion that Gabriola host a future IASC meeting.

B: Specifics: I have grouped my notes from the sessions I attended into the following theme areas: environmental; governance; and different forms of “common” land.

i) Environmental: One presentation described the work of the National Riparian Service Team, which is a governmental inter-agency governmental institution in the U.S., with ties to the U.S Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Its team of experts includes wetland ecology, hydrology, conflict resolution & the human dimension of riparian management. It functions as a sort of “swat team,” descending on a community and providing technical info. Plus coaching on collaborative process and governance.

Another presentation reported on an NGO development project in Africa, and the use of “indicators of stress” to determine when the threshold of self-coping was past and more assistance was necessary.

ii) governance: One presentation distinguished between norms (values), institutions (“rules of the game”) and organizations (making things happen). Another reported on Vincent Ostrom's work identifying the middle ground between government and private property in governing water use in Calif. , shedding light on the “strong tradition of home rule” through local and regional collaboration and decision making which, in turn, the State gov't has backed up, and so have the courts, following the “public trust doctrine.”

iii) Different forms of “commons” land. There were three presentations by Canadians focussed on First Nations initiatives, one being in B.C. And the others in Ontario. The BC case involves an “eco-cultural tourism” initiative developed in Gitga'at First Nations in Northern B.C. It builds on a Conservancy Act passed recently, establishing parks but allowing limited ec. Activity within a sustainability frame. The people are paying attention to conserving and controlling local traditional knowledge (a “knowledge commons”) even while sharing it with tourists and also finding ways to share ec. Returns and avoid “elite capture.” The Ontario cases involve native use of forestry and of trapping on crown land, blending customary rights with economic renewal and resource stewardship. Another presentation reported on the evolution of indigenous communal land-tenure system called Ejidos (80 per cent of Mexico's forest is controlled this way; it's also marginal forest land) after 1992 when the gov't introduced the option of individual ownership of these land parcels. The ejidos that resisted the resultant dissolution of the commons were more isolated, had a lot of group cohesion and also had the most rules and sanctions.

Final notes:

One of the main benefits of my having had a chance to attend the conference, and gain a bit of a profile by having been invited to present on the Gabriola Commons, is the people I met. Getting to know Elinor Ostrom was definitely the top of the list there. She is as down to earth and unassuming as the voice she brings to her book, Governing the Commons. What a treasure she is to the world, right when it needs someone like her, not only for the work she does personally but the networking she constantly does. I hope to benefit further from this as I follow up on an email I got from her last week, sharing with me the text of her Nobel acceptance speech. It's excellent.

There were many other people, including a few women from Mexico doing important work documenting and making sense of what ordinary people are doing to evolve traditional rights in new more commercialized contexts. I also met someone called Mark Lubell, whose book Swimming Upstream I want to get not just for what it will talk about collaborative water management in California, but also for his analysis. I was really impressed with his grasp of the subtleties involved in what Elinor calls “polycentric” governance. Edella Schlager, who's

worked with Elinor's husband Vincent, on water rights in California, is someone else with whom I was impressed. I am similarly impressed by the organization, and its publications. I plan to join the organization, and recommend that perhaps the Commons as an organization takes out a membership too. The rates are sliding scale, with the lowest being very affordable. (FYI, their website is: www.iasc-commons.org) Similarly, I will check out the International Journal of the Commons, and the “digital library of the commons,” which I think can be reached through: <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu>.

I will shower you with more names and book titles once I've had a chance to check out the ones I want to follow up on. But this is enough for now, I think.

One big question I have is: how many other “community commons” are there out there? I don't want to ask Elinor until I've exhausted my search through the digital library of the commons and the index of the journal. But does anyone else know?