

THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER ONE

The Things Nobody Owns

Chapter One of The Pasture Was Never Empty

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Chapter One of The Pasture Was Never Empty. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-pasture-was-never-empty (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989523).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

A quarter past nine on a Monday, and a team lead is reading the weekend's messages before anyone else is in. The team looks after a system that has to run every hour of every day, so somebody is always on call. There are nine people on the team. There is a rota, in a spreadsheet nobody quite remembers creating, and a habit of swapping shifts by message when something comes up. She scrolls back through three months of it. The same three names hold most of the weekends. Nobody assigned them. They are the three who say yes when a swap is asked for, the three without small children, the three who have never complained. One of them sent a message at two on Sunday morning, fixing a fault alone, and added a line at the end that she reads twice: no worries, I was up anyway.

CHAPTER ONE

The Things Nobody Owns



The Things Nobody Owns

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER ONE

A quarter past nine on a Monday

A quarter past nine on a Monday, and a team lead is reading the weekend's messages before anyone else is in. The team looks after a system that has to run every hour of every day, so somebody is always on call. There are nine people on the team. There is a rota, in a spreadsheet nobody quite remembers creating, and a habit of swapping shifts by message when something comes up.

She scrolls back through three months of it. The same three names hold most of the weekends. Nobody assigned them. They are the three who say yes when a swap is asked for, the three without small children, the three who have never complained. One of them sent a message at two on Sunday morning, fixing a fault alone, and added a line at the end that she reads twice: *no worries, I was up anyway*.

Nothing is broken. The system ran. Nobody broke a rule, because there is no rule to break. And yet something shared is being drawn down, week by week, by people who are each behaving reasonably. The rest of the team takes the whole benefit of a quiet weekend and bears none of the cost, which falls on three people's sleep and, sooner or later, on all nine when one of the three leaves.

The team and its rota are a composite, built for teaching: no single real team, assembled from an arrangement common in any organisation that runs around the clock. The pattern in it is not composite at all. It is one of the oldest patterns in economic life, and it has a name.

The word for it

A commons, in the sense this book uses, is any resource that more than one person draws on and that can be overdrawn. The grass on a shared pasture is the classic example. So are the fish in a lake, the water in an irrigation canal and the timber in a village forest. So, less obviously, are a team's weekends, a senior colleague's attention, a meeting calendar, a shared budget, a family's joint account and the goodwill of a key client. Each has users. Each can be depleted, crowded or degraded by overuse. And each is governed by some arrangement for who takes what, whether or not anyone has written the arrangement down.

For most of the last half-century the word *commons* has arrived in conversation already attached to another word, *tragedy*. In 1968 the ecologist Garrett Hardin published an essay in *Science* arguing that a resource open to everyone is ruined by everyone, because each user gains the whole benefit of taking a little more and bears only a share of the damage.[1] The essay was written about population. What readers kept was the pasture, and the conclusion that shared things are destroyed unless they are divided into private holdings or placed under the control of a government.

Elinor Ostrom spent her working life finding out whether that was true. It was true of some arrangements, and she said so. It was not true of many others. In *Governing the Commons*, published in 1990, she set out what she had found in alpine meadows, village forests, irrigation systems and fisheries that their users had kept in good order, some of them for centuries, without either privatising them or handing them to the

state.[2] The long-lived cases tended to share a recognisable set of arrangements, which she wrote down as eight design principles. In 2009 she shared the Nobel memorial prize in economic sciences, the first woman to receive it.

This book follows her to those eight principles: where they came from, where they run thin, how the house reads them, and how to use them on the commons a reader actually governs. Its claim is narrow enough to test:

Many of the shared things in a working life and a family life are governed by nobody, and the cost of that falls on the people least likely to say so. Ostrom's principles are among the most thoroughly tested accounts of how people who share something can govern it themselves, and they work on a rota or a joint account for the same reasons they work on a mountain pasture.

The team lead does not need a theory of human nature to fix the rota. She needs to see that the rota is a commons, that at the moment it is an open one, and that there is a well-documented way to make it a governed one, which does not begin with a new policy from her.



Why now

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Why now

Ostrom's work is more than thirty years old, and a reader may fairly ask why it needs a book now. There are three reasons, and none of them depends on a fashion.

The first is that a great deal of what organisations now run on is shared and unowned. A factory could fence most of what it depended on: buildings, machines, stock. A firm of knowledge workers depends just as heavily on arrangements nobody owns outright: the knowledge in a shared repository, the attention of the few people everyone asks, the reputation that lets a stranger trust the brand, the calendar that decides

whether anyone has an uninterrupted hour. In 2007 Ostrom and the librarian Charlotte Hess published a collection of essays asking what the principles might mean for shared knowledge, and their answer is one this book returns to in Chapter 6: knowledge is not used up by being used, but the care that keeps it current is.[3] What is overgrazed in a modern firm is rarely grass. It is people's time and attention, and the goodwill that makes them give it.

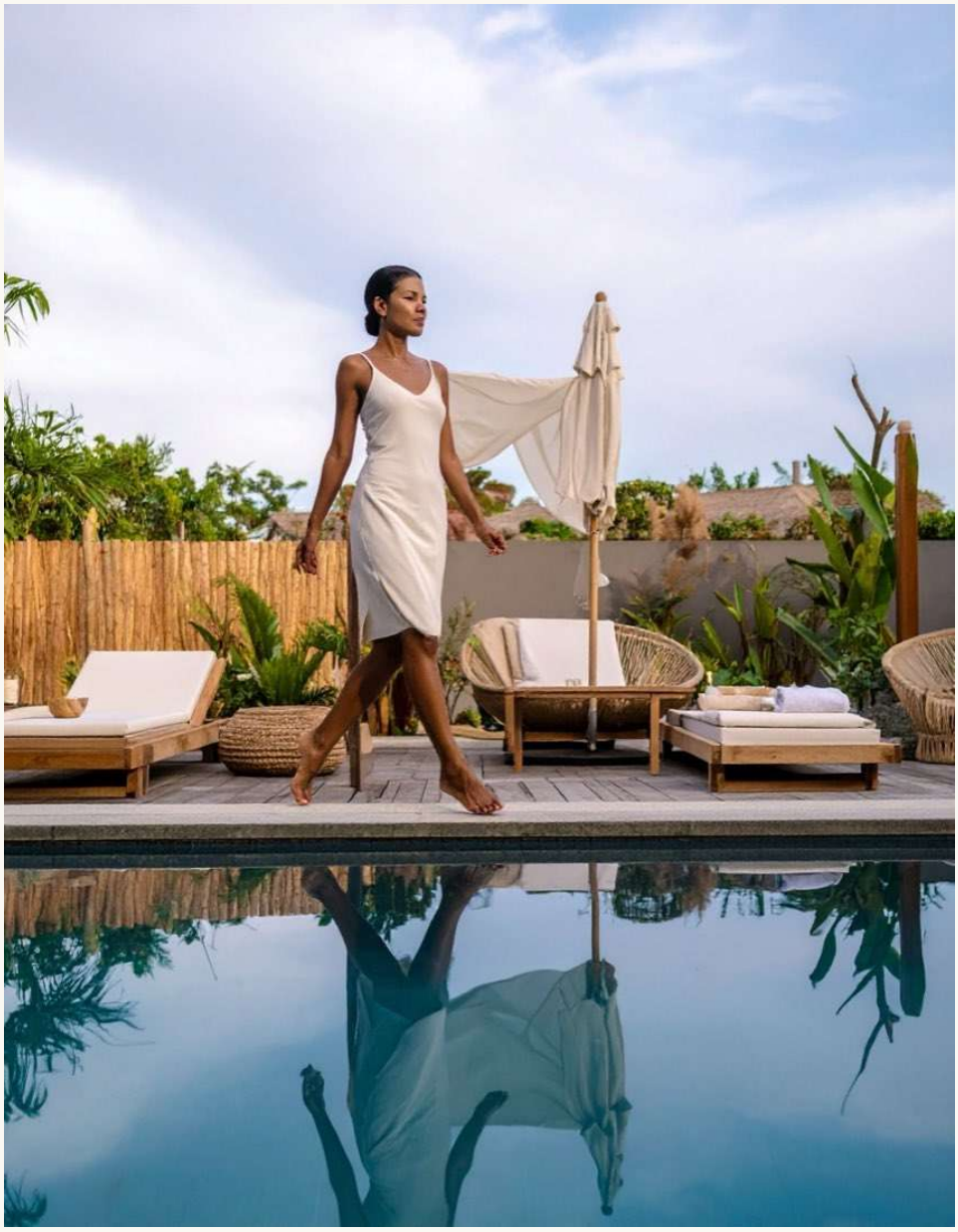
The second is that the default answers are still the two Hardin offered. Faced with a shared resource that is being overdrawn, many organisations reach for the fence and the deed, a charge-back system that bills each team for its use, or for the fence and the government, a policy issued from above. Both sometimes work. Both often fade, the first because it turns a shared practice into a transaction and the second because the people it governs had no part in writing it. The cloud budget in Chapter 5 and the consultancy in Chapter 8 have each tried the second answer more than once before the book meets them. Ostrom described a third answer, and the evidence for it has held up as other researchers have tried to break it, though not in the form most people learned. Chapter 3 sets out what they found.

The third is that the principles were argued, in a paper Ostrom wrote with the evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson and the environmental scientist Michael Cox in 2013, to be general: not rules for forests and fisheries but the conditions under which cooperation can hold in any group whose members could each do a little better, alone, by taking more than their share.[4] That paper is a theoretical argument, and its authors presented it as a hypothesis. But it is the reason a reader can use these principles on a meeting calendar without stretching them, and it is why this book spends as long on a household's joint account as on a Swiss alp.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics*, on which this book draws throughout, puts the underlying discovery in a sentence:

> *some forms of wealth are best created and maintained through collective stewardship rather than private ownership or state control.*[5]

The word *some* is doing honest work there. Not every shared thing should stay shared. Chapter 7 gives a test, from the anthropologist Robert Netting's study of a Swiss village, for telling the resources that suit common holding from the ones better divided. The book's argument is only that the third way exists, that it is well evidenced, and that many leaders and households never consider it, because the word *commons* came to them already attached to *tragedy*.



Who the book is for

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Who the book is for

It is written for five readers, and each will find a chapter written chiefly for them.

The first is a person who leads a team and shares something with it that keeps being overdrawn: specialist time, a budget, a rota, a room. Chapters 2 to 6 give the ideas and a tool at the end of each; Chapter 8 gives thirteen weeks, end to end, for taking one commons from open to governed.

The second is a person who sits above several teams, a division head, an operations director, a managing partner, and is tired of issuing the same policy every quarter. That reader is what Ostrom called an outside authority, and Chapter 6 says plainly what a good one does and does not do. The sponsor's role in Chapter 8 is written for them.

The third is a person who answers to a board, a finance function, a union or a set of partners, and will have to persuade them. Chapter 10 gives six conversations with scripts, including one for the colleague who has read Hardin and is sure he is right.

The fourth is a person who wants to know whether it worked. Chapter 9 is about measurement: the condition of the resource, how it is used, and whether the loops that keep it alive are turning, read honestly against a baseline taken before anything changed.

The fifth is a household. A joint account, the work of keeping a house, a parent's care, a cottage that three siblings inherit: each is a commons in Ostrom's strict sense, and many are governed by goodwill alone until goodwill runs out. Chapter 11 is written for a kitchen table.

It is not written for anyone who wants advice on investments, property or law. Where a chapter touches ownership of a house or the terms of employment, it says that a lawyer or the collective agreement governs, and it means it.

The house's reading

Ostrom's principles are usually taught as a list of eight. This book reads them as something else, and the reading is the particular contribution of the house it comes from.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* treats an economy as a living system rather than a machine, and it treats a commons as one of the oldest organs of that system. Its account of what was lost when common land was enclosed is not about acreage. It is about knowledge:

> *the subtle, embodied knowledge of how to steward shared wealth — knowledge accumulated over generations of collective practice — is lost.*[6]

That knowledge is what the eight principles write down. Chapter 4 reads them as the parts of a single organism: a membrane that says who is in and what is shared, senses that notice overuse, a reflex that answers it in proportion, and repair that settles disputes and lets the users change their own rules. A commons lasts, in this reading, when all four are connected in loops, so that a signal goes out, something happens, and the result comes back and changes the next signal. Remove a loop and the rule on paper does not change, but the system stops correcting itself.

The reading has a practical edge, which is why it belongs in a book of tools. A leader who sees eight rules will try to install them, one at a time, and will be surprised when the installation does not hold. A leader

who sees four loops will ask a better first question: which of them is already working, and which arrow is dotted? On the rota, the answer is quick. There is no membrane, since nobody has said what a fair share of weekends is. There is no sense loop, since the team lead found the pattern only by scrolling back three months. And so there can be no reflex and no repair, because nothing has been noticed in time to answer. The first move is not a rule. It is to make the weekends visible to all nine.

The same book is careful about what it is not claiming, and this book keeps the same care:

> *They are not anti-market (many coexist with and complement market activity) and they are not anti-property (they depend on legally recognized property structures).*[7]

A governed commons is not a protest against prices or ownership. It is the arrangement that markets, firms and families rely on, and rarely name, for the things that cannot sensibly be priced or divided.



How the book is built

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How the book is built

The book has thirteen chapters. The first half is about seeing; the second is working ground.

**Chapter 2,* The Pasture Was Never Empty,* goes back to the pasture Hardin borrowed from an Oxford lecture of 1833, to the fishery economics that came before him, and to Ostrom's workshop in Bloomington. It sets out the eight principles in her order and corrects three myths about them. Its tool is the Commons Inventory, a way of finding the shared things a reader already governs.

Chapter 3, Where the Eight Run Thin,* takes the five most serious criticisms of the principles, from the review of ninety-one studies that found them well supported to the scholars who showed how a durable boundary can also be an unjust one. The principles survive, but not in the form most people learned them. Its tool is the Principle Audit.

Chapter 4, Eight Loops, Not Eight Rules,* gives the house's reading in full: membrane, senses, reflex, repair, and the nesting that ties them together, which Ostrom called polycentric governance. Its tool is the Loop Map.

Chapter 5, Thursday at the Apostles' Door,* sits before the cathedral in Valencia at noon on a Thursday, where a tribunal of elected farmers has settled disputes over irrigation water for centuries, and then follows a composite software firm that borrows the Thursday for its cloud budget. Its tool is the Graduated Response Ladder, which begins with a private word.

Chapter 6, A Commons on Monday,* steps back to show that the commons is not a corner of economic life but a condition every other part depends on: trust, reciprocity and reputation, the triad in Ostrom's presidential address of 1997. Its tool is the One-Page Commons Charter.

Chapter 7, Meadows, Forests, Fishing Grounds,* walks slowly through four long-lived cases and a comparison that did not end well, and gives a method for reading any case, including one's own. Its tool is the Case Reading Card.

Chapter 8, The Field Manual,* sets out thirteen weeks, end to end, for one commons inside an organisation: five roles, four phases, a decision and an artefact each week, and what to do when it stalls. Its tool is the Thirteen-Week Plan.

Chapter 9, Counting What the Commons Holds,* asks three questions instead of one: is the resource in better condition, is it being used well, and are the loops working? Its tool is the Commons Health Sheet.

Chapter 10, The Hard Conversations,* gives the six conversations with scripts: a board, finance, a union, partners, family and the sceptic. Its tool is the Conversation Cards.

Chapter 11, The Household Commons,* takes everything home: a joint account looked at every Sunday morning, the work nobody counts, an inherited cottage and a parent's care. Its tool is the Kitchen-Table Charter.

Chapter 12, The Gate in the Evening,* reads the whole book as one living system, sets it beside the other books of the house, says plainly what the book does not show, and ends on one image. Its tool is the Gate Card, ten minutes a week for anyone who keeps a commons.

Chapter 13, The Workbook,* gathers every tool in one place, in the order a team or a household is most likely to use them, with a ninety-day plan for each.



How to read it

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How to read it

Each of the first twelve chapters ends with a tool written out in full, meant to be filled in by hand and kept beside the charter it helps to write. Most take an hour or less. They can be used in the order the book gives them, and Chapter 13 sets out that order with times, but a reader who needs only the ladder or only the household charter can go straight to it.

Every case in the book is either a public, cited one or a composite, and the composites say so in the paragraph where they appear. Their figures are set for illustration and are not drawn from any filing or study.

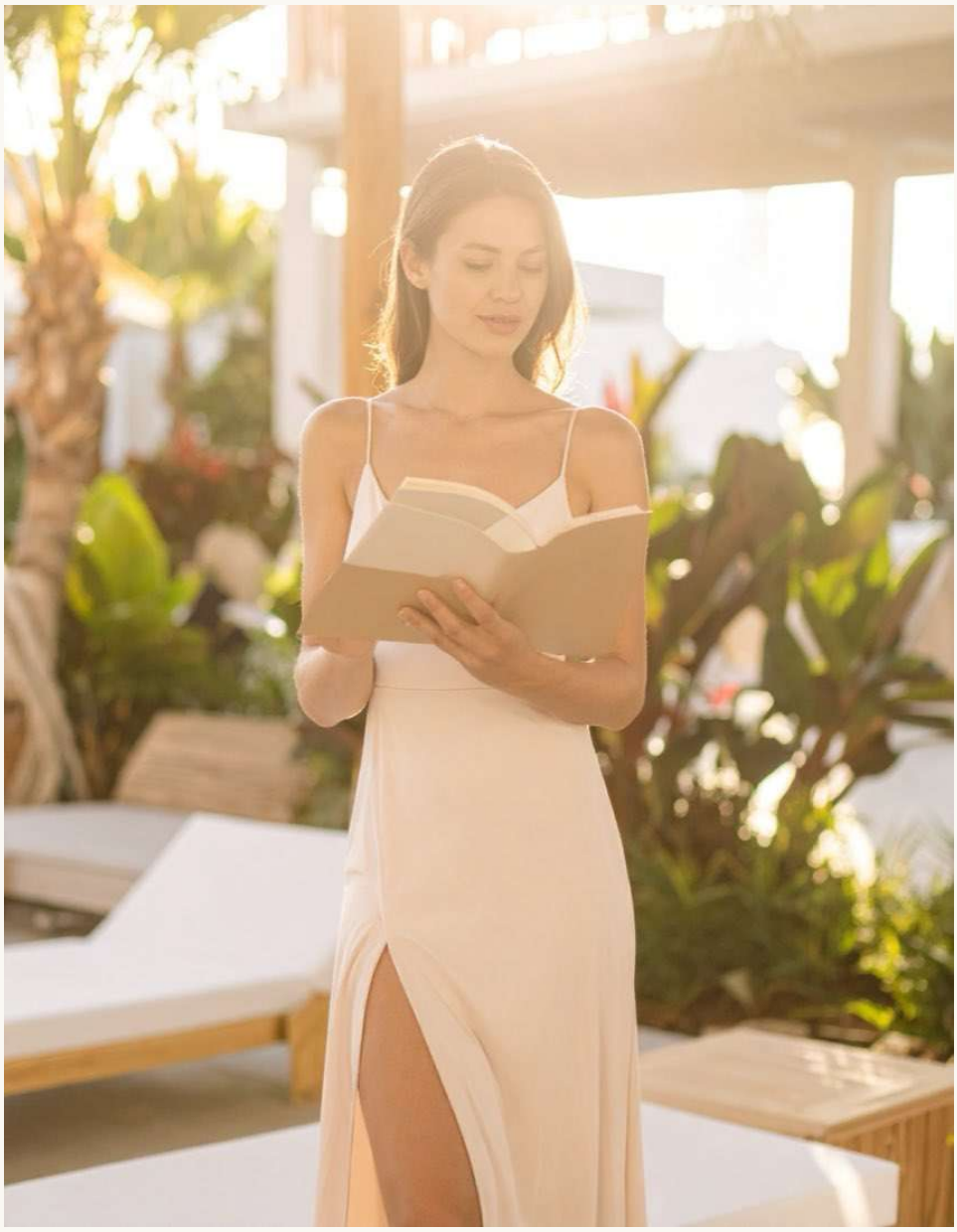
Every study cited in the notes carries a line saying what it cannot show, because the habit of saying so is half of what Ostrom taught her field. The thirteen-week sequence and the scripts are this book's recommendations, drawn from the principles and the cases; they have not themselves been tested as a programme, and the book says that again where it matters.

Nothing in it is investment, legal or tax advice, and nothing in it promises a result. The principles describe what long-lived commons tended to share. They do not guarantee that a particular team or family will keep its shared things in good order. What they offer is a way of seeing which arrangement is in place, and a sequence for changing it with the people who live under it rather than for them.

Back at the rota

On the Monday in the composite, the team lead does one thing. She takes the last three months of swaps out of the message thread, puts them in a single table, and shares it with all nine, with one line beneath: *I think this is a shared thing, and I don't think we've ever agreed how to share it. Can we look at it together on Thursday?*

That is the whole of the first week, and it is enough. Chapter 2 explains why the next step is to find the other shared things nobody has named, and the rest of the book follows the rota's logic outward to budgets, benches, canals and kitchen tables. The rota was a commons before anybody called it one. Most shared things are.



The Tool: The First Look

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The Tool: The First Look

A ten-minute exercise, alone, before reading further. It is the smallest version of the Commons Inventory in Chapter 2, and it can be done on a train.

1 · Three things you drew on this week (4 minutes). Name three shared resources you used in the past seven days that someone else also depends on and that could run out, wear thin or get crowded. At work, think of time, attention, money, space, tools and goodwill. At home, think of money, time, the car, the evenings, a parent's care.

SHARED THING	WHO ELSE DRAWS ON IT?	IF I TOOK TWICE MY USUAL SHARE, WOULD ANYONE NOTICE? WHEN?

2 · The one nobody watches (2 minutes). Circle the row where the honest answer to the last column is *no one*, or *only when it ran out*. That is an open commons, in Hardin's sense.

3 · Who carries it (2 minutes). For the circled row, write the name of the person who bears most of the cost when it is overdrawn. If the answer is *me*, write that. If it is someone who has never complained, write their name and underline it.

4 · One sentence (2 minutes). Write the sentence you could say to the others who share it, this week, that would make the pattern visible without blaming anyone. Begin it with *I think this is a shared thing*.

Keep the page. Chapter 2 turns it into the full inventory.

A note on method

The team and its rota are a composite built for teaching; every detail in them was set for illustration.

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