

THE PASTURE WAS NEVER EMPTY · CHAPTER THREE

Where the Eight Run Thin

Chapter Three of The Pasture Was Never Empty

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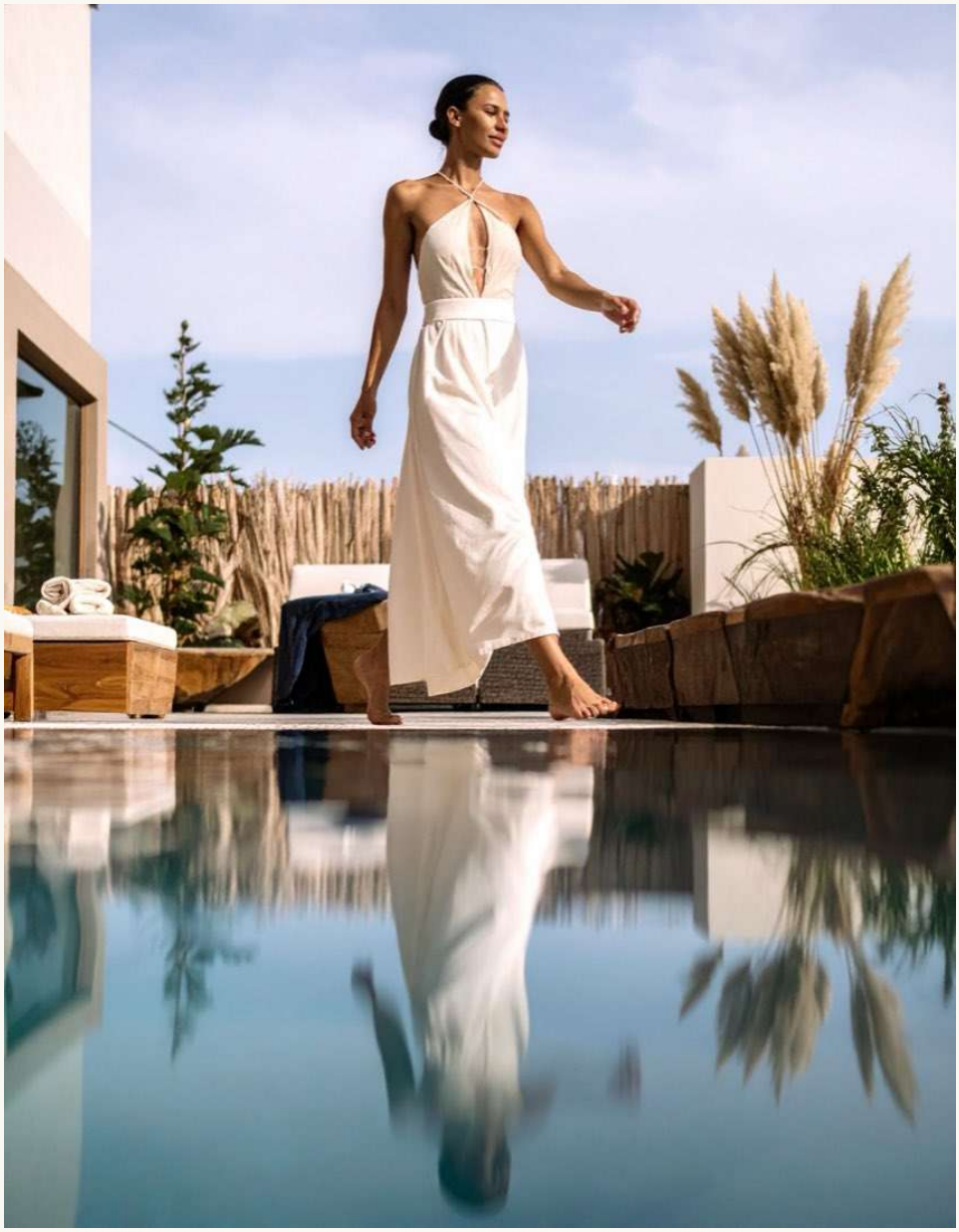
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ABSTRACT

A good idea in the social sciences has a particular fate. It is first ignored, then quoted, then simplified, then tested, and only after the testing does anyone know what it is for. Elinor Ostrom's eight design principles reached the testing stage quickly, partly because she asked for it. She published them in 1990 as a hypothesis drawn from a few dozen long-lived commons, and she spent the next two decades inviting other people to try to break them. They did try. The results are more interesting than either the admirers or the sceptics expected, and they matter for anyone who wants to use the principles on a real team or a real budget rather than admire them in a book. Chapter 2 set out where the principles came from and corrected three myths about them. This chapter takes the five most serious criticisms, states each as fairly as its best critic would, and then gives the way through. The claim is simple: the principles survive their critics, but not in the form most people learned them.

CHAPTER THREE

Where the Eight Run Thin



Where the Eight Run Thin

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The test of a good idea

A good idea in the social sciences has a particular fate. It is first ignored, then quoted, then simplified, then tested, and only after the testing does anyone know what it is for. Elinor Ostrom's eight design principles reached the testing stage quickly, partly because she asked for it. She published them in 1990 as a hypothesis drawn from a few dozen long-lived commons, and she spent the next two decades inviting other people to try to break them.

They did try. The results are more interesting than either the admirers or the sceptics expected, and they matter for anyone who wants to use the principles on a real team or a real budget rather than admire them in a book.

Chapter 2 set out where the principles came from and corrected three myths about them. This chapter takes the five most serious criticisms, states each as fairly as its best critic would, and then gives the way through. The claim is simple: the principles survive their critics, but not in the form most people learned them. They survive as a set of conditions that work together, read in context, with the questions of power and scale put back in.

Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* holds the same double view of monitoring, the principle most easily turned into something ugly. It wants the watching, and it wants the watching to be of a particular kind:

> *Trust, but verify. Not through surveillance and punishment, but through transparent, community-embedded observation.*[19]

That sentence contains, in compressed form, a good deal of what the research below found.



The recipe that was never one

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The recipe that was never one

The criticism. The principles are usually taught as a checklist, and a checklist implies that each item can be ticked separately and that more ticks are better. If that were so, a commons with seven of eight principles should do better than one with five, and adding any missing principle should help.

What the evidence shows. In 2010 Michael Cox, Gwen Arnold and Sergio Villamayor Tomás published a review of the principles in *Ecology and Society*.[20] "We analyzed 91 such studies," they wrote, studies that had tested the principles, openly or by implication, against seventy-seven cases from forests and fisheries to ir-

rigation and pasture. Their verdict was plain: "the principles are well supported." To code the cases they split three of the principles into parts, because each was doing two jobs at once. Principle 1 became 1A, the boundary around the users, and 1B, the boundary around the resource. Principle 2 became 2A, rules that fit local conditions, and 2B, costs to each user that match the benefits each receives. Principle 4 they coded as 4A, whether monitors are present at all, and 4B, whether the monitors are members of the community or accountable to it. The second of these, accountability, was the more strongly supported of the two.

In the reformulation they proposed at the end, they kept the splits of 1 and 2, suggested adding to principle 1 a fit between the user boundary and the resource boundary, and divided monitoring a different way: users watching one another's behaviour, and users watching the condition of the resource. Principles 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 they left as Ostrom wrote them.

Six years later, Jacopo Baggio and colleagues went further in the *International Journal of the Commons*.[21] Using a coded database of cases, they asked whether any single principle was necessary or sufficient for success. The answer was that none was, on its own. Success came from configurations: particular combinations of principles that appeared together in the cases that lasted, and different combinations in different kinds of resource. The principles behave less like items on a list and more like organs in a body. Their value is in how they work together.

The way through. Stop scoring the principles one at a time. Read them in pairs and triples and ask which are holding each other up. A boundary without monitoring is a sign on a gate nobody watches. Monitoring without a graduated first response becomes surveillance, because the only available reaction to what is seen is a heavy one. Collective choice without conflict resolution produces meetings that end in grievance. The audit at the end of this chapter asks about combinations for that reason, and Chapter 4 reads the combinations as loops.

The variables left out

The criticism. Eight principles cannot capture what makes a commons succeed, because success depends on many things the principles do not mention: the size of the group, how unequal its members are, how mobile the resource is, how fast it regrows, how close the market is, what the state is doing, what the technology allows.

What the evidence shows. Arun Agrawal made this criticism with care and with sympathy in a 2003 review in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*.[22] Three of the major syntheses of the field, he observed, Robert Wade's, Ostrom's, and Jean-Marie Baland and Jean-Philippe Platteau's, "jointly identify 36 important conditions" for a commons to last; strip out the overlaps and twenty-four different conditions remain. Add what the wider literature had found, and he judged the total to lie "somewhere between 30 and 40"; his own table lists thirty-three. Many of them are not institutions at all. They are features of the resource and the setting. A group of twelve households sharing a slow-growing forest faces a different problem from a thousand

boats chasing a migratory fish. Agrawal's point was that studies had too often looked only at the rules and too rarely at the context the rules sat in, and that small comparisons could not tell which of thirty variables was doing the work.

Ostrom accepted much of this. Her later work, especially the social-ecological systems framework she published in *Science* in 2009, was an attempt to give researchers a common vocabulary for the resource, the users, the governance system and the setting together, so that cases could be compared on more than their rules.[23]

The way through. Before applying any principle, describe the resource. How fast does it replenish? Can its use be seen, or is it hidden? Does it move? How many people draw on it, and how different are they from each other? A shared engineering budget is visible and slow to replenish; a team's goodwill is invisible and replenishes in its own time; a meeting calendar replenishes every Monday and is overdrawn by Wednesday. The same principle will take different forms on each. The audit asks for this description first.



Scale, and the commons nobody can see

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Scale, and the commons nobody can see

The criticism. The principles were drawn mostly from small, local, long-settled communities whose members knew each other. The largest commons of the present century are none of those things. The atmosphere, the open ocean, the stability of a financial system, the trust that makes a digital platform usable: their users are counted in millions or billions, they will never meet, and many of them cannot see the effect of their own use.

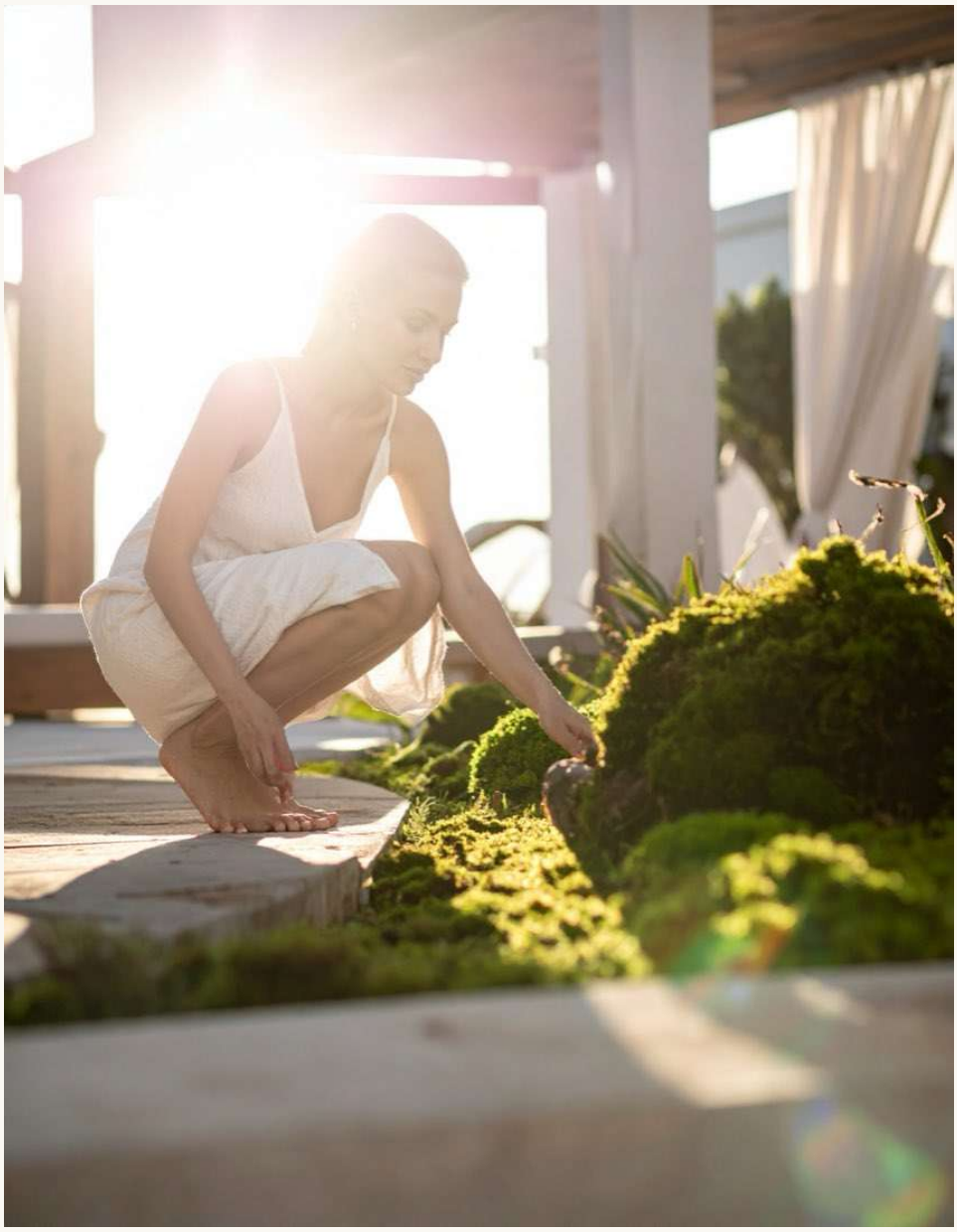
What the evidence shows. Thomas Dietz, Ostrom and Paul Stern addressed this directly in "The Struggle to Govern the Commons", published in *Science* in 2003.[24] They agreed that global commons are harder, and said why: the users are many and diverse, the effects are delayed and distant, and the people who bear the costs are often not the people who decide. Their answer was not a new principle but a stronger emphasis on three of the old ones. Governance at scale, they argued, needs good information about the resource and its users, which is monitoring; it needs ways to deal with conflict, which is principle 6; and it needs institutions arranged in nested layers, which is principle 8, with enough variety among them that a mistake in one layer does not become a mistake everywhere.

The Luminous 100, the house's reading of the frameworks organisations already use, describes the logic of nesting in its entry on Stafford Beer's Viable System Model: every team a viable system inside a viable department inside a viable organisation, each

> *simultaneously autonomous and embedded.*[25]

That is principle 8 written from the inside.

The way through. For any commons too large for its users to meet, find the smallest layer at which people can know each other, and give that layer real authority over what it can see. Then build the layer above it for what crosses between the smaller ones. In a firm of three thousand people, the shared resource of senior attention is not governed by a company-wide policy. It is governed in each division, and the company layer handles only what divisions take from each other. The audit asks, for each principle, *at which layer does this happen?*



The rule from outside

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The rule from outside

The criticism. Principle 7 asks only for minimal recognition of the users' right to organise. That understates the problem. Outside authorities do not merely fail to recognise local institutions; sometimes their well-meant rules actively damage them.

What the evidence shows. In 2000, Juan-Camilo Cárdenas, John Stranlund and Cleve Willis ran field experiments with villagers in rural Colombia who depended on local forests.[26] Participants played a game for real money that mirrored their real choices about how much to extract from a shared resource. In some

groups, they could talk to each other. In others, an external rule was imposed, with a modest chance of inspection and a fine for overuse. The striking finding was that the imposed rule, which should have improved behaviour, tended to do worse over time than communication alone. The authors called it institutional crowding-out: an outside rule, imperfectly enforced, displaced the group's own norms of cooperation and left something weaker in their place.

It is one set of experiments, in one region, with a game rather than a forest. It does not prove that external rules always crowd out. But it agrees with Ostrom's laboratory work and with a long line of field observation that cooperation is partly a matter of who made the rule. Santa Anna's book says it in a sentence any manager will recognise:

> *People comply more willingly with rules they helped create.*[19]

The way through. When an outside authority, a head office, a regulator, a board, must set a rule for a group that already governs itself, it can set the *outcome* and leave the *method* to the group. Head office sets the limit on travel spending for a division; the division decides how to share it. The outside rule then sits on top of the local one instead of replacing it. And when a new rule is being considered, ask first whether the group already has a norm that does the same work. Replacing a living norm with a written policy can lose more than it gains. Chapter 10 gives the conversation with head office in full.



The boundary that excludes

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The boundary that excludes

The criticism. Principle 1 asks for clear boundaries: who is in and who is out. Every boundary that protects a resource also excludes someone from it. Many traditional commons that lasted for centuries did so partly by keeping out newcomers, women, the landless or the poor. A principle that rewards durability can quietly reward exclusion.

What the evidence shows. This criticism has been made forcefully by scholars of gender, caste and land, and Ostrom's own cases contain examples. Grazing rights on Törbel's alp belonged to citizens of the village;

in the Spanish *huertas* water went with land, so the landless had none. Agrawal's review makes the uncomfortable point directly: in a society organised by steep hierarchy, he wrote, arrangements that distribute benefits unequally may last longer than fair ones, and he named the caste system and racial inequality as examples.[22] Durability and fairness are different questions, and the principles answer the first more directly than the second.

The way through. Treat principle 1 and principle 3 as a pair. A clear boundary is legitimate when the people inside it can change it, and when there is a known way for someone outside to come in. Write the entry route down with the boundary. A team's shared budget that names who may draw on it should also say how a new member gains that right. A family that defines who may use the car should also say when the sixteen-year-old joins the list. A boundary without a door is a wall.

There is a quieter form of the same problem, which is the sanction. Principle 5 says graduated, but a graduated sanction can still fall harder on the people with least standing. Santa Anna's book names the purpose a sanction must keep:

> *The goal is to maintain the community, not to destroy the violator.*[19]

That means consequences designed to repair the resource and keep the person in the group, applied the same way to everyone, including whoever leads.

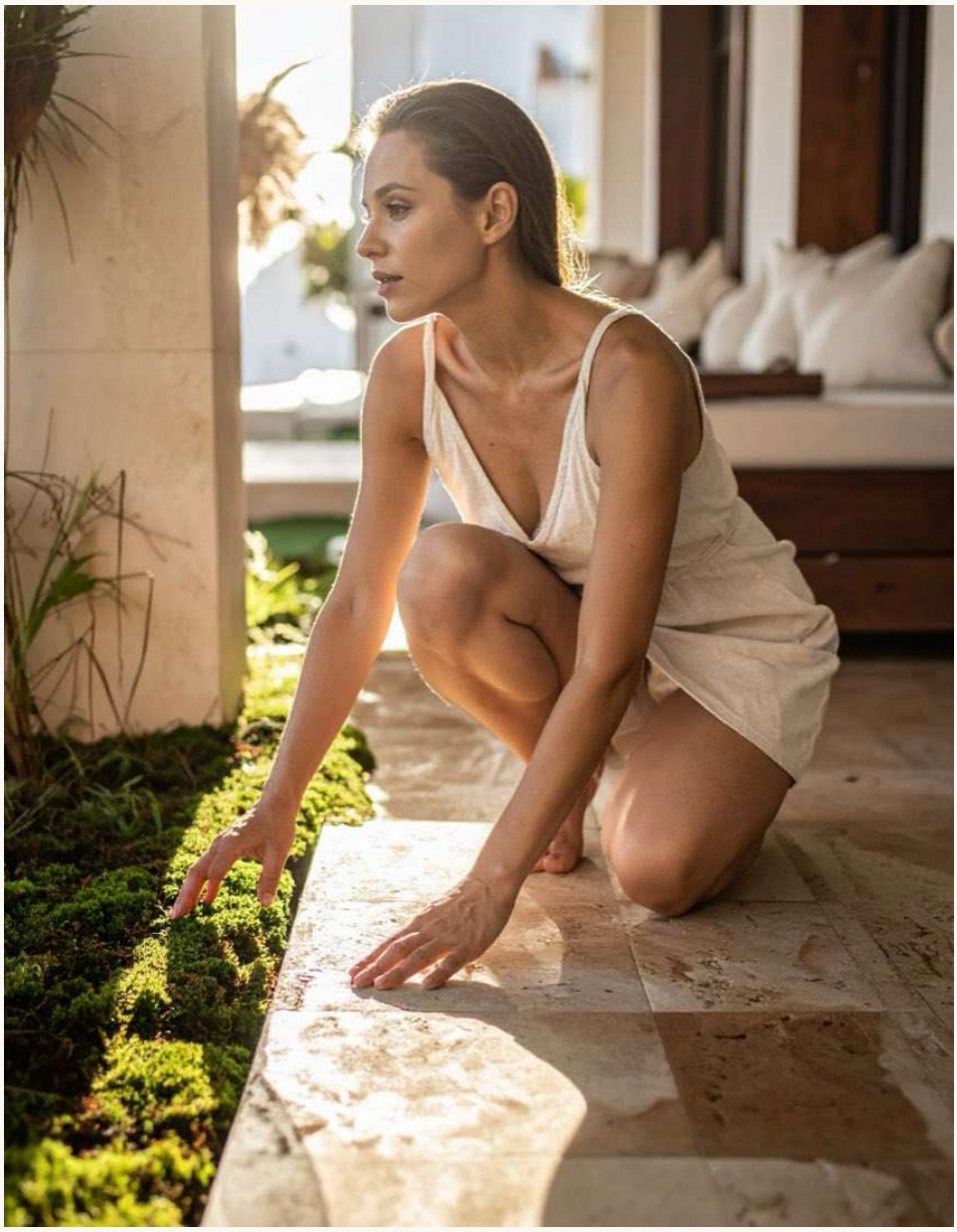
What survives

Put the five criticisms together and something clear remains. The principles are not a recipe; they work in combination. They are not complete; context has to be described before they are applied. They do not scale by themselves; they scale through nesting and good information. They can be undermined from outside; the outside authority should set outcomes and leave methods. And they do not guarantee fairness; boundaries need doors and sanctions need to be even.

None of this was hidden from Ostrom. Most of it was said first by her, by her collaborators, or by critics she invited to the Workshop. Her work has been tested by its friends more rigorously than most economic ideas are tested by their enemies, which is part of why it can be trusted.

The criticisms also explain why this book keeps company with others in the lineage. The history of gainsharing reads, in this light, as a long argument about principle 2B, the proportion between what people put in and what they receive; the evidence on employee ownership keeps returning to principle 3, the right to change the rules.

The pasture in Lloyd's lecture had no fence, no gate, no meeting and no way to settle a quarrel. Most real commons have some of those and lack others. The work is to find out which, in what combination, and for whom.



The Tool: The Principle Audit

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The Tool: The Principle Audit

A ninety-minute exercise for a leader and the people who share a resource with them. Use one resource from the Commons Inventory in Chapter 2, ideally the one you marked *open* or *fenced* and chose in step 4. Do it with at least two people who draw on the resource and are not its formal owner.

Part A · Describe the resource first (15 minutes). Answer in a sentence each:

1. How fast does it replenish? (daily, weekly, yearly, never)

2. Can each person's use be seen by the others? (yes, partly, no)
3. How many people draw on it, and how different are their needs?
4. What is the cost when it is overdrawn, and who bears it?
5. Is there an outside authority (head office, board, regulator, parent) whose rules already apply?

Part B · Score the split principles (30 minutes). Use the reformulation of Cox, Arnold and Villamayor Tomás. Score each 0 (absent), 1 (partly present, or present on paper only) or 2 (present and used). For each score, write the evidence: one thing that happened in the last three months that shows it.

PRINCIPLE	SCORE 0–2	EVIDENCE FROM THE LAST THREE MONTHS	AT WHICH LAYER DOES IT HAPPEN?
1A The users are clearly defined			
1B The resource is clearly bounded			
1C The two boundaries fit each other			
2A Rules fit local conditions			
2B What each puts in fits what each takes out			
3 Users can change the rules			
4A Users (or people accountable to them) watch how the resource is used			
4B Users (or people accountable to them) watch the condition of the resource			
5 The first response to overuse is small			
6 Disputes can be settled quickly and cheaply			
7 Outside authorities leave room to organise			
8 Larger matters are handled at a larger layer			

Do not total the column; the total is not the point. Note whether the watchers in 4A and 4B answer to the users: that accountability was the best-supported finding in the review.

Part C · Read the combinations (20 minutes). Answer each question with the scores in front of you:

- Is there a boundary (1A, 1B) without monitoring (4A, 4B)? Then the boundary is a sign nobody reads.
- Is there monitoring (4A) without a small first response (5)? Then the monitoring will feel like surveillance.
- Is there collective choice (3) without conflict resolution (6)? Then rule-changing meetings will end in grievance.

- Is there a boundary (1A) without a known entry route? Write the entry route now.
- Is there an outside rule (Part A, question 5) that replaced a norm the group already had? Name the norm.

Part D · Choose two moves (15 minutes). Choose the two principles whose absence makes the others weak. Usually that is one pair from Part C. For each, write the smallest version that could start within two weeks; who will do it, and to whom they are accountable; and what you will see in a month if it is working (an observation, not a feeling).

Part E · Agree how to review (10 minutes). Set a date four weeks out. At that meeting, re-score only the two principles you chose, with new evidence, and ask the people who share the resource one question: *what would you change?*

Keep the scored table. Chapter 4 reads it as a set of loops; Chapter 5 shows a graduated response ladder in working form; Chapter 9 gives a health sheet that tracks the same loops, one you can keep over a year.

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