

ARISTOTLE AND WALKING ON THE GRASS

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Spring is the time plants awaken from their long winter to begin life anew. In addition to the plants, there will be another reawakening this spring. The environmental movement will awaken from a relatively inactive period during the past several years. This reawakening, called Earth Day, will be celebrated around the globe on 22 April, 1990. A large group of very viable, non-dormant environmentalists are currently planning campus-wide activities for Earth Day. If you are interested in participating contact John DeGroot, Patty Wagner or me.

As Earth Day draws near, we will hear about many environmental crises, each more tragic than the next. One link between each of these tragedies is that they involve a violation of the "commons". Garrett Hardin, in a brilliant essay that should be required reading for every college graduate (Science 162:1243-1248; 1968), developed the idea of the commons.

Hardin considers a commons to be any resource, such as air and water, that is shared by many. Given freedom to use the commons, Harding concludes that its ultimate fate is destruction. This occurs because individuals gain fully from the use of the commons while only sharing partly in its destruction. Thus, each member, unless completely altruistic and unswayed by peer pressure, is tragically compelled to use the commons, ultimately destroying it. Hardin describes this scenario as the "tragedy of the commons" and correctly concludes that we must limit individual freedom in a commons by "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of people affected".

As an example, a campus lawn is a commons. On the way to class, we might cut a corner and individually benefit by saving a few seconds. Although one set of footprints will not harm the grass, many will. The freedom to use this commons (lawn) results in the destruction (unsightly paths) of the lawn. Tragically, we are compelled to do this because "everyone else does" and "what

difference can I make" and because we share in the cost of the destruction of this resource (it's not hard to imagine that departmental budgets are slightly smaller and student tuitions are slightly higher to help pay for such repairs). The only way to preserve a resource (lawn) is to limit freedom - Please don't walk on the grass!

Hardin certainly wasn't the first to recognize our disrespect for commons. Aristotle knew, "That which is common to the greatest number gets the least amount of care". Perhaps lawns would get more respect if they were as "common" as a Minnesota prairie.