

his subjects to explain how their arcane labors relate to *What It All Means*. Hearing Fredkin explain how the universe is “governed by a single programming rule,” or Wilson elaborate upon “the evolutionary epic” of gene-culture interplay, or Boulding muse upon the rise of cultural diversity out of the division of labor, we feel as though we had wandered in on the ultimate bull session—with real geniuses as participants. This is science—and science writing—with a refreshingly human face.

**THE QUESTION OF  
THE COMMONS:  
The Culture and Ecology  
of Communal Resources**  
edited by Bonnie M. McCay and  
James M. Acheson  
Univ. of Arizona, 1987  
439 pp. \$35



In 1968, ecologist Garret Hardin outlined the principles of a theory that he labeled the “tragedy of the commons.” According to Hardin, the world’s commonly held resources—e.g., air, oceans, fish, grasslands—were in danger because no one is motivated to take care of them. The “rational individual” is impelled to do only one thing: “to take as much as possible before someone else does.” Freedom and equality in the use of the “commons” condemns them to ruin.

Twenty years later, anthropologists McCay and Acheson, of Rutgers and the University of Maine, respectively, have assembled 18 essays by researchers in various fields examining different aspects of Hardin’s much-cited prediction. Their broadest conclusion: It is still too early to judge its general validity.

More immediately helpful are the objections that the contributors raise to various blurred distinctions and hidden assumptions in Hardin’s theory. For example, Hardin too quickly assumes that the terms “commons,” “communal activity,” and “communal tenure” mean roughly the same thing to all cultures. In many societies and subcultures, whether those of Maine lobstermen or Tigray farmers, access to the commons (lobsters in one case, fertile land and pasturage in the other) is limited by any number of natural or established restraints. Social pressures, whether formalized in law or religious taboos, prevent pure selfishness from prevailing.

In the industrialized West or in the jungles of the Third World, interdependence, communication, and cooperation can help lead to what the editors see as “less inexorably tragic outcomes” than Hardin anticipated.