

# The Tragedy of the Commons Revisited

## The COLA Call

by Ed Mutsch

In 1968 the journal *Science* published an essay, The Tragedy of the Commons, by Garrett Hardin, a well known and highly controversial ecologist. While the essay was prompted by Hardin's concern with the problem of human population growth, its underlying thesis, i.e., that the unrestricted access to a public resource ultimately leads to the spoliation-----or worse, destruction----of the resource, has been regularly invoked by economists, sociologists, psychologists, public policy professionals, and government regulators as a model to frame issues of concern to them and to drive policy prescriptions.

If one considers north central Minnesota watersheds and the associated rivers, lakes, and wetlands to be a valuable public resource---I have earlier argued that our water resources are Hubbard County's most valuable resource---and if one accepts a "Hardin conclusion" that the cumulative impact of all the individual, unrestricted, self serving uses of that resource portend trouble, each Hubbard County citizen should feel compelled to help preserve the quality of that resource and his or her stake in it.

Some readers will undoubtedly point out that the Hardin model is inapplicable here as use of the resource is not unrestricted, that there are numerous laws that, for example, govern the species, size and number of fish that can be taken; prohibit the removal of terrestrial vegetation to the water's edge; severely limit the harvest of native aquatic vegetation; prohibit the transfer of any aquatic vegetation from one lake to another (did you know that one?); prescribe structure setbacks and allowable impervious surface areas; etc., etc., etc. While the point is appropriately made, there is also the rub. While we do have an extensive body of law intended to protect our water resources, the existence of those laws is both a blessing and a curse; a blessing in that citizens and their legislators obviously recognize the need for such protective laws, but a curse in that perennial inadequate funding of the enforcement of those laws, and the trivial penalties associated with enforcement when it does occur, combine to create a false sense of security. We don't have to worry about protecting the integrity of our water resources; we have laws and organizations such as the Minnesota DNR and the MPCA to enforce them. Never mind that, despite it

having been over 30 years since the Federal Clean Water Act mandating assessment of our nation's surface water quality, only a fraction of Minnesota waters have been assessed, a high percentage of those that have been assessed are impaired, and virtually none of those determined to be impaired have been remediated. Never mind that funding for Hubbard County conservation officers enables little more enforcement on average than a few hours per lake per season. We can sleep well tonight, secure in the knowledge that laws have been enacted and enforcement responsibility assigned. [Note: small bit of sarcasm here.]

Sadly, the Hardin model is all too applicable. As north central Minnesota population growth accelerates and the attendant development pressures mount, the tragedy of the commons looms ever larger. Our rivers and lakes face an ever growing threat from aquatic invasive species (AIS) and other types of pollution accompanying increased resource utilization which in turn can severely compromise their recreational suitability, adversely impact shore land property values, and erode county tax capacity.

With respect to aquatic invasive species specifically, the threat to Hubbard County lakes grows ever more serious. During 2006 Eurasian water milfoil was found in 13 additional Minnesota lakes, bringing the total number of Minnesota lake infestations to 190. While none of these lakes are in Hubbard County, the threat is close at hand, with some of them in Cass (Leech Lake), Itasca, and Crow Wing counties, greatly increasing the likelihood of the importation of this noxious aquatic from one of those lakes into Hubbard County on a trailer, boat, or jet ski. Curly leaf pondweed prevalence is even more troubling; its presence has been documented in 740 lakes in 68 Minnesota counties, including Portage, Upper Twin, Blueberry, and, most recently, 11th Crow Wing Lakes in Hubbard County.

As yet, Hubbard County lakes have avoided invasion by two other damaging water pests, spiny water flea and zebra mussel, although, as with Eurasian water milfoil, these threats are geographically near.

Thus, while Hubbard County might appear to some as in comparatively good shape, being free of three of the four currently most troublesome AIS while having but a small number of lakes infested with curly leaf pondweed, the threat grows ever more ominous. A year-by-year look at a Minnesota map dotted with documented infestations vividly and alarmingly shows such infestations increasing in number and moving ever closer to our own precious Hubbard County waters. Many of our citizens are oblivious of the threat. Others are fatalistic, feeling infestation to be unavoidable. The ignorance is correctible, the further infestation preventable. But the prevention will require a broad-based group of the citizenry, working in concert with the DNR and other conservation-oriented governmental groups. And, while such prevention will require the continuous vigilance of this broad-based group, the dollar value of such preventive vigilance will be small compared to the continuous dollar investment required to control the AIS infestations once they are firmly ensconced. So, what can the individual Hubbard County citizen do?

One can begin by educating oneself to recognize the various AIS and the threat they represent to our lakes and rivers; the DNR

website can be a good place to start. Go to [www.dnr.state.mn.us](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us), type 'Aquatic invasive species' in the search box, and dig in. Use the newfound knowledge to adopt a 'best practices' approach to use of our county waters, while becoming a proselyte, sensitizing your friends and neighbors to the issue.

As far as more active involvement of time and substance, citizens are encouraged to respond to the COLA call for additional recruits. The efforts and resources of such organizations as the DNR, while of critical importance, are inadequate in and of themselves to ensure victory in the battle against AIS. Victory will require each and every one of us concerned about this issue to step up. Come, help COLA preserve and protect that which is of such vital importance to us all.

[Next: What a beautiful site! Such beautiful sights! Let's develop it!!!]

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