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Climate Change: Tragedy of the Commons

If you have never heard of the term “Tragedy of the Commons”, Google it, you will get about 350,000 hits. This is a quote from Wikipedia: “The **tragedy of the commons** refers to a dilemma described in an influential article by that name written by [Garrett Hardin](#) and first published in the journal *Science* in 1968. The article describes a situation in which multiple individuals, acting independently, and solely and rationally consulting their own self-interest, will ultimately deplete a shared limited resource even when it is clear that it is not in anyone's long-term interest for this to happen.”

Historically, the commons referred to an area in a small community. Today that community is our planet and today we are living a tragedy of our commons.

About 190 countries from around the world are currently meeting in Copenhagen with the goal of establishing targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions over the next few decades. Thousands of people from around the world are in Copenhagen representing business, government, non-government organizations, all with their own agendas. Unfortunately many of these agendas compete against each other.

Historically, the tragedy of the commons occurred due to individuals’ self interest, today those self interests are country based, not individual. And people from within the same countries are competing against the self interests of each other.

For example, Fredericton’s own Taryn McKenzie-Mohr, now a first year student at University of Toronto, made headlines in the Globe and Mail two days ago for going head to head with Canada’s chief negotiator in Copenhagen. Throughout the past week of the Copenhagen Conference Taryn has been apologizing to fellow youth from developing countries for Canada’s lack of progress on climate change.

Canada, in fact, is once again leading the ‘Fossil of the Day’ awards, which recognizes glaring inaction on climate change (the ‘award’ is given out by The Climate Action Network, a worldwide network of about 500 non-government organizations). As the tragedy goes, Canada is protecting its own self-interest (Fort McMurray) and showing no leadership, claiming that we are waiting to see what the United States will do.

China and the United States are trading words. China claims that developed countries, such as the U.S. and Canada should be doing more to help developing countries than they are currently. The U.S. says China should be doing more about their own emissions. And so the story goes.

Perhaps self-interest can happen in the commons in a positive manner. My interpretation of that phenomenon would be those leading countries that are creating jobs by exporting green technology.

Take Germany for example. It is projected that by next year, the renewable energy industry in Germany will exceed their automotive industry in total jobs. There will be more green jobs than all of VW, Porsche, Audi, Mercedes and BMW combined. This is leadership that is contributing to the commons, at home and abroad.

Where does Canada rank on the renewable energy radar? According to a recent report released by the World Wildlife Federation (WWF), Canada ranks near the bottom, behind such countries as Kyrgyzstan and Slovakia.

We are depleting non-renewable energy sources in Canada (taking from the commons) for a quick buck, while negatively impacting our ability to compete globally in clean energy technologies that can make a positive impact on the commons and, just as importantly on our domestic economy – jobs!

Much like the days when there were 100 citizens of a small town sharing a common area for their sheep to graze, we are over 6 Billion people today sharing limited resources for the same purpose – survival.

I sincerely hope at some point before the Copenhagen Conference ends, that all of the countries of the world recognize that we need to do this together and there is opportunity for everyone to benefit in one form or another. Realistically if not a few days from now, sometime soon. There is not much grass left to graze.

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