

Special Issue on Latin American Commons: An Introduction

A ‘commons’ can be considered any resource (environmental or otherwise) that is subject to forms of collective use, with the relationship between the resource and the human institutions that mediate its appropriation considered an essential component of the management regime. Like public goods, common resources suffer from problems of “excludability” (*i.e.*, it is physically and/or institutionally difficult to stop people from accessing the resource). Like private goods, they are also “subtractable” (or “rivalrous”), whereby resource use by one person diminishes what is available for others to use. As Ostrom (1990) explained, conventional wisdom assumes that the sustainable management of common resources can only be achieved through centralized government or private control. Yet empirical evidence (garnered from both real world case studies and laboratory work) has challenged this assumption – to show that alternative forms of property can work effectively if well matched to the “attributes of the resource and users, and when the resulting rules are enforced, considered legitimate, and generate long-term patterns of reciprocity” (van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007: 19). As the same authors go on to note, “many people, ranging from policy makers, donors, practitioners, and citizen activists, to scientists from different disciplines, have begun to appreciate that there is a world of nuances between the State and the market”.

This issue

Latin America is a complex region in socio-cultural, economic and environmental terms, where natural resource commons play a significant role in the livelihoods of millions of people (Robson and Lichtenstein, this issue). Secure access to such resources is considered critical to regional and global environmental sustainability efforts and for helping marginalised groups escape hunger and poverty, and move towards greater self-determination (Sen 1999; Alden Wily 2011). Yet our knowledge of how Latin American commons are currently used and governed remains limited. We know little, for example, about how individual country experiences compare, or the degree to which commons regimes are struggling to persist or transforming to endure in the face of globalization and other contemporary challenges

In order to fill some of these knowledge gaps, in January 2011 we organized a double session on Latin American commons at the 13th Biennial Conference of the *International Association for the Study of the Commons* (IASC), held in Hyderabad, India. The purpose was to provide a platform for commons researchers, whose work was based in the region, to discuss their findings and experiences, to connect researchers, thematic foci, resource type and disciplinary backgrounds, and to provide impetus for future commons research. As part of these interactions, the potential for research to influence policy in the region was raised.

The event proved very successful and, consequently, we felt it was important that some of the lessons learned made it into print and reached a wider

audience. It is therefore with great pleasure that we are able to present, in this special issue of *JLAG*, a series of articles that shed light on some of the important issues of the day affecting commons and commoners in Latin America. Some are borne out of the papers presented at the IASC conference and others build upon more recent work and thinking. All focus on natural resource commons; a bias that reflects both the types of commons predominantly studied in Latin America, as well as our own interests. Some of the articles focus on individual countries and others take a more regional approach, while some focus on one particular resource type and others encapsulate multiple resource commons.

The first of our articles, by Robson and Lichtenstein, sets the scene by looking at the state of commons research in Latin America, through an exploration of communal land tenure systems across the region and an analysis of the research conducted since 1990 and subsequently published in international journals or presented at international conferences. In doing so, the authors show what Latin American commons are being studied and by whom, and to discuss the implications of these findings in terms of future research direction and government policy-making.

Following this Latin America-wide review, we move to the first of our papers based on country-level studies. We begin proceedings in Mexico, a country long held up as a model of commons use and management. David Bray provides an analysis of the origins, changes and formal structure of the country's constituted communal land tenure systems, to highlight how institutional supply at the community level remains an incomplete process, with the state maintaining more influence over the country's commons than is generally realized. Using the country's community forestry sector as his case study, and Elinor Ostrom's pioneering work on institutional choice as a theoretical reference point, Bray generates a number of important lessons that offer to refine our understanding of how commons evolve and function.

We remain in Mexico for our next piece, where Dan Klooster tackles one of the most pressing contemporary phenomena affecting natural resource commons: rural out-migration. As a driver of change associated with neoliberal and globalizing forces, migratory processes have the potential to reconfigure how commons and commoners operate across Latin America, and thus our notion of what a commons is. In a review of recent research conducted in Mexico and among migrant communities in the US, Klooster provides an insight into the opportunities and challenges facing commons collectives that, on the one hand, must adapt to problems of depopulation and aging residents, and, on the other, find ways to benefit from the flows of economic and cultural resources that characterize the establishment of trans-border or trans-local communities.

From Mexico we move south to the forest commons of Central America, where Anne Larson and Iliana Monterroso argue that more dynamic approaches are needed for researching commons as they are shaped and changed by the ongoing challenges facing local commoners and their negotiations with the state. Case studies from Guatemala and Nicaragua are used to show how greater attention needs to be paid to change over time, and how the growing

demand for rights recognition among users – and the granting of rights in some important cases – is driving the formation of new types of commons spaces and boundary configurations.

Next up is Costa Rica, a country that stands out among Latin American nations for its policy commitments towards environmental protection. Within such a context, Xavier Basurto focuses on the institutional characteristics that are enabling adaptive forms of collective action to emerge that may contribute to effective biodiversity conservation. The analytical scope, however, is not at a local level as may be expected but rather considers the multi-level interactions (i.e. local, national, and international) that treat biodiversity as a public good rather than a common-pool resource, and where the “community” that depends on conservation for their livelihoods is one that consists not of local farmers or fishermen but the governmental employees who work in protected areas. This scenario is one that is rarely encountered or considered by conventional common property theory and the paper offers a number of important lessons.

From Central America we head to South America and to the first of two papers from Brazil. In this piece, Vincenzo Lauriola focuses on the struggles of indigenous peoples to gain secure tenure rights to their communal resources. Making use of a case study – that of the Macuxi people of Raposa Serra de Sol, in Brazil’s North– and associated Supreme Court decision, the paper discusses the difficulties that come when demarcation of Indigenous Lands (IL) overlaps with government protected areas (Conservation Units). The findings highlight the importance of secure statutory tenure rights for indigenous peoples and strengthen calls for juridical pluralism in the environmental and resource policies that affect resource-dependent communities.

For our second study from Brazil, Cristiana Seixas and colleagues provide a review of commons research at the national level, but in contrast to Robson and Lichtenstein’s (this issue) region-wide review they base their findings on data gathered via a survey of Brazilian Ph.D.-level researchers and scholars. They report on the state of commons research and training in Latin America’s most populous and economically powerful country, and discuss the impact that this work has had on government decision-making at different levels, as well as the grassroots initiatives that seek to wrest greater control and influence over the country’s natural resource commons.

Argentina is the focal point for our final paper; a country that remains largely absent from commons scholarship. Focusing on the use and management of wild guanacos as a non-conventional common-pool resource, Gabriela Lichtenstein highlights how Argentinian public policies reflect the historical denial of indigenous and low-income rural communities by the State, promoting private rather than common property regimes. Resource commons do persist, however, and the case of guanaco live-shearing programs in Mendoza Province, in the western central part of the country, and similarly vicuña management in Bolivia to the north, offer hope for achieving a form of sustainable commons use that benefits marginalized groups over powerful elites.



The late Nobel Laureate
Elinor Ostrom (1933-2012)

Finally, we dedicate this issue to the memory of Elinor Ostrom, an outstanding scholar and inspirational personality. In this globalized world, with its penchant for selfishness and individuality, Elinor shed light on the concerted efforts of commons collectives around the world to persist and even flourish despite the corrosive influences of modernization, homogenization and commodification. Our hope is that this special issue contributes in its own small way, by helping to illuminate the struggles of commoners in one particular global region – that of Latin America.

Jim Robson and Gabriela Lichtenstein

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