Managing the Commons: New Directions?


Reviewed by J. Walter Milon

The proceedings of the Conference on Common Property Management, held in Annapolis, MD, on April 21-26, 1985, represents a unique effort to communicate the discussions and conclusions of a group of distinguished scholars and practitioners in the field of international development planning on the issue of common property resource management. The conference objectives outlined by Bromley and Feeny were to (1) identify specific causes leading to success or failure in common property management using specific performance indicators, (2) develop a research agenda to clarify the causal relationships determining performance, and (3) recommend specific tasks for international agencies and host countries to better understand and use common property management. To accomplish these objectives, a planning committee solicited papers from academicians and international agency personnel involved in research and administration of common property systems across four continents. Papers were circulated prior to the conference so the authors and other participants could focus on discussion about its objectives.

The proceedings, edited partly to integrate the conference presentations and discussions, consist primarily of case studies on different resource systems by specialists plus a few introductory and summary papers that provide perspective on the outcome of the conference. The introductory papers by Oakerson and Runge describe common property resource management as a typical economic problem, namely, how to determine rates of production and consumption from a natural resource to enhance community welfare. They argue that the critical features distinguishing "common" property from "private" property management are (1) technical attributes of the resource that inhibit separation of ownership and exclusion of nonowners, and (2) distributional objectives of the community to maintain the social structure or to share the risks of dependence on uncertain natural systems (the assurance problem). Although neither Oakerson nor Runge clearly distinguishes common property from other forms of resource management and control, such as contractual limited entry or administrative regulation, they do provide a logical explanation, based on economic theory, of why communities may adopt communal ownership and control over resource systems.

The 20 case studies in the proceedings encompass a broad range of resource systems: fish and wildlife resources, irrigation and drinking water resources, range and pasture land, cropland, and forest and bushland resources. Each study follows a general outline based on Oakerson's analysis in which the technical attributes of the resource and the organization of resource management are used to explain patterns of social interaction and the effect of management on the resource. Many of the studies provide brief, but detailed, historical perspectives on the community and resource system that help us understand the reasons for continuity or change in the management system.

The summary papers by Bromley and Ostrom proffer some general definitions and conclusions from the case studies. Their major points are that (1) common property should not be viewed as equivalent to open access management since communal management defines and enforces use rights and, (2) the success of any common property arrangement depends on the delineation and enforcement of institutional rules that represent the interests of the community.

The concluding paper by Peters addresses the three objectives of the conference. Her remarks suggest that the participants were unable to define specific measures of performance so that it is difficult to judge the success or failure of common property management. The research and action agendas developed from the discussion indicate a greater need for understanding the role of common property systems in the overall social structure and a need for more cross-cultural studies identifying common principles of management and evolution.

The case studies represent the major contribution of the proceedings. The practitioner in an international development agency will find many well-documented analyses of resource management using common property systems that provide valuable operational insights. These analyses may be useful in specific country studies or as reference materials in evaluating or developing common property systems in other areas. The researcher will benefit from the broad geographic and resource system coverage of the case studies and from the historical perspective of the articles. In particular, the comparative study of commonfield agriculture in England and the Andes by Campbell and Godoy and the study of common land management in Japan by McKeen describe the linkages between property ownership, government, and social structure in these societies. These studies illustrate the ways in which institutional rules influence individual behavior, such as how limits on harvesting and cultivating the commons in Japan led to family planning and lowered population growth. These historical perspectives are useful complements to North’s work on the role of property institutions in economic development in Anglo-Saxon countries.1

Many conference proceedings lack integration among individual papers. The authors of the case studies in this proceedings do focus on the objectives of the conference and the opening and closing commentary papers do provide some perspective on the progress of the conference. However, the reader gains little appreciation for the discussion that was the main focus of the conference. And, there is little explanation of how or why the participants reached the conclusions reported in Peters’ closing paper. As a result, this volume leaves many unanswered questions about the role of common property management for resource systems.

Although many of the case studies provide excellent descriptions of particular systems, the proceedings does

not provide a clear discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of common property relative to other property ownership systems. Nor does it provide a rationale for understanding why property rights may change from one form to another. This shortcoming is particularly apparent in some case studies in which common property was replaced by private ownership.

Yet the forces causing the transition were only briefly evaluated. Similarly, although some authors acknowledge related works by other researchers on property rights, organization theory, and collective choice, none provides a clear linkage between research on common property systems and research on resource allocation mechanisms.

Despite these shortcomings, the book should be of interest to specialists in international agriculture and resource development. Most readers will find the individual case studies informative, but they will need to do their own cross-study evaluation to identify consistent patterns and relationships between resource systems and the organization of economic activity. At the very least, readers will better appreciate the complexity of natural resource system management and the value of common property organizations in achieving social objectives.