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The Triumph of the Commons

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It's not often you get to meet a Nobel Prize winner.

Elinor Ostrom, who won the prize in 2009 for her work in economics, was 77 when I met her at a conference last year. She had spent a lifetime carrying out groundbreaking research that demonstrated that ordinary people are capable of creating rules and institutions for the sustainable management of shared resources.

It hardly sounds groundbreaking, does it? It sounds like common sense. Yet the management systems in place today for shared resources like fresh water, fisheries and conservation lands are largely based on a completely opposite model of human behaviour. That model assumes that people can't be trusted to care for shared resources, and is best explained in an article written in 1968 by Garret Hardin called *The Tragedy of the Commons*.

Hardin's message, in simple terms, is that people will act to maximise their own self-interest, so that if there is a common resource each person will use as much as they can. Because each individual acts without consideration for collective interests, the resource will become depleted or polluted unless strong rules are imposed by government or other agencies.

But was he correct? Unfortunately, for many situations, it appears he was right. The tragedy of the commons can be



Elinor Ostrom: A lifetime of research.

seen in the depletion of many fish stocks globally, in the incremental increases in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and, closer to home, in the increasing levels of pollution of New Zealand's lakes and rivers.

In other situations, Hardin's tragedy does not play out, and this is what interested Elinor Ostrom. Working with teams of people from all over the world, her studies painstakingly investigated examples of shared fisheries, forests, grazing lands and irrigation systems where people were managing to maintain long-term sustainable resource yields, and were doing so without laws and regulations imposed by government agencies.

Over more than 40 years, she and her

team sifted out the key elements that made up successful management systems that did NOT result in a tragedy of the commons.

What were these elements? It basically came down to self-organised "governance systems" made up of the people who used the resource. The resource must be "local" and not too large a scale, with clear boundaries and a definition of who is permitted to use it. All or most of the resource users must be able to take part in decision-making, and the rules must be crafted to suit local conditions. Importantly, local monitors make sure the local rules are followed, and there are "graduated sanctions" for those who don't abide by the rules.

The successful systems also had simple methods of conflict resolution, effective communication, and trust between members. Government authorities recognised and respected the local decision-making and self-determination.

Where the resources were large, like coastal fisheries, there might be many small local management systems supported by higher level laws and agencies.

Elinor Ostrom's work showed conclusively that, given the right circumstances, people are able to work together to manage resources sustainably – a "triumph of the commons". In New Zealand, we have a few great examples of "triumphs" but many more examples of large-scale "tragedies" such as declining water quality, losses of biodiversity and over-fishing of some species. Our management systems clearly aren't working. Maybe it is time to create more opportunities for local stewardship of shared resources, based on Ostrom's model.

Elinor was warm, modest, and radiated something that could only be called wisdom. I invited her to visit us here at Otago, and she politely replied that she would love to come but could not fit us into her diary this year. In reality, she was dying. Elinor passed away on June 12, not long after she was named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people for 2012.

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The "tragedy of the commons" can be seen in the increasing levels of pollution of New Zealand's lakes and rivers.