

A Critical Evaluation of Garrett Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Common'

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Abstract

The relationship between living and non-living beings within the ecosystem is crucial to their mutual survival. Plants, animals, humans, and even the land itself must accommodate one another to sustain the environment. Sustainability becomes threatened when individuals act solely in their own interest to the detriment of others. Garret Hardin's The Tragedy of the Commons highlights the risk of unregulated use of shared resources by self-interested actors, predicting inevitable environmental ruin. This paper critically engages his thesis using comparative and critical analysis to assess both its validity and its applicability, particularly within the African context. It argues that Hardin overlooks the value of community-led cooperation and misrepresents the idea of the commons by confusing common property with open-access property. His call for government regulation, privatization, and under-consumption poses greater risks in societies already struggling with poverty and hunger. In places like Africa, under-consumption would bring severe hardship, not sustainability. In essence the idea of excessive governmental control, especially in fragile institutions, may worsen inequality and exploitation. However, in contrast, community-based collective action provides us with a more adaptive, humane, and effective approach to managing shared resources. This paper concludes that while Hardin raises important concerns, his proposed solutions are both simplistic and potentially harmful if applied uncritically to complex, diverse societies.

Keywords: Environment, Sustainability, Commoners, Regulation, Ecosystem

Introduction

The concept of environmental sustainability has remained a recurrent issue in contemporary discourse, especially as global concerns over ecological degradation continue to intensify. Human beings, in their quest for comfort and progress, have been faced with the challenge of managing limited natural resources. Within the shared ecosystem, which includes animals, plants, birds, trees, and land, peaceful coexistence is vital. However, the pursuit of human convenience has led to unbridled exploitation of the environment through territorial expansion, industrialization, oil exploration, and construction activities (Ojomo, 2019; Mogaji, 2025b). These developments have severely harmed the ecosystem, displacing habitats and degrading biodiversity. Negative environmental impacts, ranging from oil pollution

and gas flaring to noise and air pollution, have become unavoidable consequences of unchecked anthropocentric development (Ojomo, 2019; Mogaji, 2025b). Hence, this situation demands urgent re-evaluation if we are to avert ecological collapse.

A significant body of literature has addressed the destructive tendencies of human-centeredness in environmental relations (Ojomo, 2011, 2019, 2024; Mogaji, 2024, 2025a, 2025b). One of the most influential is Garrett Hardin's *The Tragedy of the Commons*, which argues that the overuse of shared resources by self-interested individuals inevitably leads to their depletion. This position remains relevant, especially given the rising environmental inequalities driven by elite overconsumption. Hardin's work echoes in the scholarship

of Taylor (1994), who critiques human-centered environmental ethics and underscores the need to move from anthropocentrism to a more inclusive ecological moral consciousness. According to Taylor, an exclusive focus on human interests undermines the intrinsic worth of other living beings and threatens the ecological harmony required for sustainability. In advancing the position of the selfishness of man, in being anthropocentric, Taylor (1994) pushes the argument of Hardin further thus:

A human-centered environmental ethics takes account only of human interests, the human benefits and harms that various environmental policies will lead to. A human-centered approach is based on the assumption that only human life (or more generally the lives of beings that are persons) has intrinsic worth and that therefore in issues regarding the care of the earth's environment, only human interests count.

From the above, the core problem addressed in this paper, therefore, lies in the persistence of anthropocentric world views and the exploitation of communal resources without accountability. Hardin's position that humans must regulate resource use and control population growth may offer insights; however, his proposed remedies, under-consumption, privatization, and top-down government regulation, are problematic. These recommendations become especially dangerous in contexts such as Africa, where poverty and hunger already prevail. Under-consumption, in such regions, would exacerbate suffering rather than alleviate it. This paper argues that Hardin's proposals are not only overly simplistic but potentially harmful. He fails to distinguish adequately between common property and open-access resources, and more importantly, he overlooks the potential of community-based regulation and cooperation. This neglect is significant, especially in societies where state institutions are often weak or complicit in ecological degradation. The imposition of rigid population controls and privatization without communal input risks deepening inequality and alienation.

In light of the above, the paper aims to critically and comparatively analyse Hardin's propositions by exposing their inadequacies and exploring more sustainable alternatives. This paper adopts a

comparative and critical method to evaluate his claims and to advocate for a more inclusive, life-centered ethic that acknowledges the moral worth of all living entities. The paper argues that a collaborative, community-driven framework if adopted, offers a more ethical and effective solution for managing environmental resources, through medium such as engaging collective community action, rather than relying solely on state or market mechanisms. Through this, this paper argues that environmental sustainability can be pursued more holistically. This paper concludes that, while Hardin rightly draws attention to the dangers of self-interested resource use, his neglect of community-based solutions limits the practical value of his work, which this paper considers significant if at all we are to meaningfully address the crisis of environmental sustainability in a way that is just, locally responsive, and globally aware.

Environmental Crises and the Need for Sustainability

No doubt, one of the current global issues is the ongoing environmental crisis, which has led to severe damages to the ecosystem. According to Ojomo (2011), this crisis has prompted several environmental ethical theories for the purpose of addressing the root cause of these problems. Today, there are issues surrounding climate change, which has led to global warming and therefore birthed several environmental crises, including threats from the increase in extreme weather patterns, the causing of drought conditions, which has led many farmers to abandon their land, biodiversity loss, poverty, inequalities, among many other issues. According to Bentley (2013), many of these crises, however, are not inherently alien to the human society, but naturally, the Earth has always possessed the regenerative ability to recover from some damages naturally caused. In this case, environmental crisis, however, in contemporary times, has become more severe due to anthropogenic activities, and the damages being caused are largely arising due to the issue of capitalism (Bentley, 2013; Mogaji, 2025b), all of which affects every corner of our environment.

In Mogaji (2024), while attempting to redefine the concept of domestic violence, he identifies how

certain domestic activities can harm and endanger the health of the environment. Drawing from the Earth eco-socialist principle, he argues that the environment harbours life and should be treated with the same dignity and respect as any living being. The environment, he maintains, possesses a living essence and therefore can be abused, exploited, violated, and even oppressed, much like other vulnerable entities. Through the expansion of the notion of violence beyond interpersonal relations to include harmful practices against the Earth, Mogaji (2024) presents an eco-philosophical critique that challenges anthropocentric and exploitative domestic norms. This perspective not only reimagines our ethical obligations but also emphasizes the interconnectedness between everyday human activities and ecological degradation. Mogaji (2025b) further this position by arguing that, these issues have dripped deeply into our society, as it has bred several other issues originally alien to the human society, as far as our contemporary time is concerned, all of which, he argued, are traceable to human-induced activities. These, however, in Mogaji (2025a), become prevalent and persistent due to man's cognitive biases, which have continued to aid the continuous existence of these problems. These biases, he argues, include confirmation bias and anchoring bias, some sort of cognitive bias that helps humans hold on to exploitative world views and degradation without sufficient moral reconsideration (Mogaji, 2025a).

This crisis is further aggravated by what Naess (1990) calls "shallow ecology," a mindset that sees nature only in terms of its usefulness to humans, rather than valuing ecosystems intrinsically. Such thinking fuels exploitative behavior and limits ethical engagement with non-human nature. In this same vein, Kothari et al. (2015) contend that the dominant development paradigm, tied to neoliberal economic growth, is inherently at odds with ecological balance and sustainability. Another major contributor to the crisis is the faith in technocratic solutions and uncritical scientific progress, which often overlooks traditional ecological knowledge and culturally grounded sustainable practices (Agrawal, 1995). In prioritizing reductionist science over local epistemologies, societies have alienated themselves

from reciprocal relationships with the environment. As Shiva (1988) rightly argues, environmental degradation is not simply about resource depletion but a symptom of deeper epistemological violence where local voices and non-Western world views are erased from discourse. This made Ojomo (2011) argue that, given the global presence of these issues, it becomes imperative to explore other means to curb this problem as it continues to resurface.

Garret Hardin's Argument on "Tragedy of the Commons"

Coming from this loaded and wide credentials and experience having read Zoology and microbiology, Hardin's experience in nature and science culminated in him developing more interest in ecology and the symbiosis relationship among the ecosystem. His work showcased the danger in the freedom associated with the exploitation and individualistic tendency of the selfish interest individuals who capitalized on the use of commonwealth resources without taking consideration for the use of others. He argued that human over-population will stress ecosystems beyond their limits and cause a resource catastrophe.

Garrett James Hardin's "Tragedy of The Commons" published in 1968 was widely read and accepted and was rated as one of the most cited scientific papers of all time (Nijhuis, 2012), describes a situation where the shared environmental resources are being overused and exploited, which he warned that it will get depleted which will eventually pose a grave risk to everyone involved. He "justifies such action on the ground that each individual would pursue his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commoners" (Rahman, 2003). In other words, the work asserts that the unregulated use of commonly held resources by self-interested individuals will inevitably lead to the ruin of those resources. He also hinged his postulation to overpopulation. According to Nijhuis (2021)

In "The Tragedy of the Commons", Hardin's proposition was simple and unsparing: humans, when left to their own devices, compete with one another for resources until the resources run out. Ruins are the destination toward which all men rush, each pushing his own best interest.

These calls for serious caution as the circumstances of the immediate danger turn to ruin as the scarce resources being manipulated by his selfish individuals, who ascribed everything to themselves without recourse to the interest of others, will amount to a great danger if not checked. A critical view of his work revealed that the selfishness of some set of people within the ecosystem in terms of their lifestyles and ways of consumption will lead to the depletion and ruin of the shared resources. A typical example of this lifestyle can be seen especially in Nigeria where some set of elites and a handful of some ruling class like three percent of the total population are in charge of the commonwealth resources of people doing whatever they like with the destiny of people without any considerations to their welfare of this category of people. As far as they are satisfied, they are less concerned about the welfare and well-being of other people.

In explaining this situation where individuals act in their self-interest depleting shared resources even when it is clear that it is not in the best interest of the group as a whole, Hardin used an example of herders sharing a common grazing ground. For him, each herder would act in their own self-interest by adding as many cattle as possible to the pasture, even though this would ultimately lead to the depletion of the resource and harm all herders in the long run. His analogy in pin-pointing the reality on the ground shows the environmental implications of world situations, such as overfishing (where you exterminate the whole fish instead of taking the one that is okay for you), deforestation (where you cut the whole trees by destabilizing the whole habitats living on the trees and the land itself), and the impact of pollution (air, and noise) and Climate change (as a result of the exploitation of lands by man). The economic implication of these problems highlighted by Hardin is the consumption of the whole resources by individuals at the expense of society. It calls our attention to the fact that if an individual acts in their best interest, it can result in harmful over-consumption to the detriment of all. This phenomenon may result in under-investment and total depletion of a shared resource.

Consequently, to avert this danger of depletion of resources by these individuals who consumer

resources at the expense of society, Hardin makes some recommendations, which to him, will avert this danger of over-population. This includes the need for government institutions that will restrict individual freedom, mutual coercion, punishment for over-consumption, and/or encouraging under-consumption of resources, among others.

A Critical Evaluation of Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Commons'

As brilliant as his postulations and suggestions are, his work has been acclaimed to be one of the highly revered works in Science and one of the most influential articles in the history of environmental thought. The work tried as much as possible to justify the state control or more often, the privatization of resources and ecosystem. No wonder, he advocated for government control. This solution is seen to be an over-simplification of solutions. I argued that his proposition for the establishment of government regulations cannot work as most of the government institutions saddled with the responsibility of doing that are failing and failing to achieve the purpose for which they were created. Not only that, there are new improved understandings and perspectives that show that much can be achieved by highly ideological perspectives of social systems. What he postulated is seen as overly simplistic and potentially harmful. The privatization of government regulation, according to critics, can lead to inequities and failure to account for the complex social and ecological dynamics of commons management. Another thing that was noted in his view is the oversimplification of the commons problem, Hardin was of the view that the exploitation of the shared resources by the commons will lead to depletion of the resources, which he linked to over-population. It was argued that his view ordinarily was over-simplified as there are many examples of various communities that successfully manage their common resource without any problem whatsoever which automatically proves his postulations to be wrong.

In solving this mirage of problems, it was argued that he over-simplified the solutions by proposing solutions such as government regulations or privatization, which are overly simplistic and potentially harmful. I argue that the proposed

government regulations especially in Nigeria where we have the likes of Environmental Protection Agencies (both at the state and Federal levels) do not change the situation of things as regards noise pollution, Air pollution, etc as this legislation which are not properly implemented are not been enforced. It is based on this that the solution can lead to inequities and failure to account for the complex social and ecological dynamics of commons' management. In this vein, I also argue that privatization or state control, may not be adequate to be the best approaches and solutions as they can lead to other problems, like inequitable access to these resources, among others.

Community-based solutions had been the most effective way of solving the problem of the tragedy of the commons which Hardin had failed to consider. He argued that "the social arrangement that produces responsibility are arrangements that create coercion, of some sort" (Hardin, 1968). Hardin failed to consider alternative approaches and solutions in his postulation. It is pertinent to state that his work focused primarily on the inevitability of resource depletion by overlooking other potential solutions such as community-based management, cooperative arrangement, and other technological advancements. Michelle exploring this idea corroborates this with a warning thus:

The "community" doing the managing must be well-defined; reliable monitoring of the shared resource; a reasonable balance of costs and benefits for participants; a predictable process for the fast and fair resolution of conflicts; an escalating series of punishment for cheaters, and good relationships between the community and other layers of authority, from household heads to international Institutions

Consequently, I argue that his neglect and the way he overlooked the numerous successful examples of communities managing their common resources sustainability through cooperation and collective actions as corroborated above by Michelle. His view on the over-exploited of common resources as a result of over-consumption is another view to look into. He recommended under-consumption as a way out of the exploitation and depletion of resources. I argue that he was out of tune with the African Continent when he was making these postulations. He failed to take into cognizance the lifestyle and

the consumption pattern of the Africans where some of the things we consume here are not over-consumption but our moderate lifestyle of feeding. Even though there is hardship and suffering, and scarcity of food and food items, he still recommends under-consumption which will hurt the growth and development of African people.

Conclusion

Garrett James Hardin had been a prolific writer, ecologist, and environmentalist. His training in the field of Zoology and Microbiology at the university had provided him the impetus to address various mirages of man, environmental degradation, and nature as a whole. It has allowed him to explore the issues that concern human overpopulation. His diversity in learning and teaching has given him the chance to write extensively on population, abortion rights, and Immigration, among others. His major work on "The Tragedy of the Commons" has stood him out as his views had been marred with condemnation and commendation. His work in "The Tragedy of the Commons", which was published in 1968 asserts that the unregulated use of commonly held resources by self-interested individuals will inevitably lead to the ruin and depletion of those resources. He created a picture of where individuals acting in their own selfish-interest depleted a shared resource even when it is clear that it is not in the best interest of the group as a whole. He argues that someone or some group of people has to take responsibility for maintaining this resource and if no one takes the responsibility, the resources can be overused and become depleted. He also argued that human over-population will stress the ecosystem beyond its limit and cause resource catastrophe. To avert the dangers of depletion and ruin of these resources, he proposed under-consumption of resources, privatization and government regulation of resources, and population control, among others.

I argue that his solutions to the problem are inadequate to solve these problems as he was accused of not paying adequate attention to the dangers inherent in his postulation, A situation where the governmental control of resources, will not be effective, as some of the government establishments were not effective to curtail those excesses, which

will eventually lead to another problems. His under-consumption of resources does not work either as he does not have the pictures of African societies, where there are scarcity of foods and food items as a result of hardship and suffering, in mind when he was writing. Above all, I strongly argue that he neglected and failed to embrace other alternative approaches and solutions such as community-based solutions, cooperative arrangements, etc which will have brought about the desired result. In conclusion, despite these deficiencies and shortcomings, his work has been rated to be one of the best publications of science of his time which has opened our eyes to the tragedy being encountered by the commoners. It has also shown the plight of the ruled against the rulers in some of African countries, especially in Nigeria where a small fraction of the elites is controlling selfishly, the commonwealth of the entire nation without taking into consideration of their well-being.

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