

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## The Tragedy of the Commons

By Garrett Hardin

**Summary:** Hardin's article is one of the most important and provocative essays of our generation. It was written in 1968, at the dawn of the environmental movement in the United States. For the first time, the scientific press saw an argument that some problems are beyond science's ability to solve. Hardin suggests a fundamental problem in the self-interest of individuals compared to society as a whole. For him, the "commons" represents any commonly held natural resource: food, land, water, air, etc.

On separate paper, write your name and the names of your group members, and then answer all the questions that follow. Everyone should have their own copy when done.

### Introduction

1. What is the essential problem that Hardin's thesis addresses?
2. What does Hardin mean by "no technical solution problems"?

### What Shall We Maximize?

3. Are the world's resources finite or infinite? Support your answer with three examples.
4. Is it possible for everyone to agree on what is in "the common good"? Why or why not? How should we make decisions that concern natural resources?

### Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons

5. Why will the herdsman always choose to add another animal to the herd?
6. Give 2 examples, one from the essay and one of your own that illustrate Hardin's thesis that private choice abuses public resources.

### Pollution

7. What is meant by the phrase "fouling our own nest"?  
Give 2 examples from home, at school, or out in the community about our tendency to "foul our own nest" while expecting someone else to bear the responsibility for cleaning it up.
8. How has overpopulation changed the rules about recycling and use of resources?

### **How to Legislate Temperance?**

9. Hardin states that because conditions change, we have resorted to large bureaucracies to help administer law, rather than just relying on the more absolute laws enacted by the state or federal government. Do you think this helps or hurts the situation? Does it help people take responsibility for their actions?

### **Freedom to Breed is Intolerable**

10. How are natural populations self-limiting? The article uses birds as an example.
11. Hardin's central argument concerns the unlimited right to breed in a welfare state. Why is this a problem? What would you propose as a solution?

### **Conscience is Self-Eliminating**

12. Hardin uses the principles of natural selection to argue that people with consciences will be eliminated over time. Explain.

### **Mutual Coercion Mutually Agreed Upon**

13. What is meant by the term coercion? Hardin uses the idea of taxation as a coercive device. It makes certain behaviors more and more expensive to continue. Give 3 examples of how this policy is used to regulate behavior today.

### **Recognition of Necessity**

14. "Freedom to Breed Will Bring Ruin to All." Some countries penalize or tax births after a certain number or offer tax relief for people who volunteer to have fewer children. Some people have proposed cutting off welfare benefits to women who have a second child. Others support mandatory sterilization of drug addicts or other groups that are "unfit". What do you think? What steps would you propose to help solve the problem of overpopulation?
15. In the 1990's, Hardin suggested that emergency food that is sent to areas hit by famine actually makes the problem worse. Hardin reasoned that when populations exceed the biological carrying capacity of their territory, famine aid would only worsen the situation by keeping the starving alive long enough to contribute to the overpopulation by their reproduction. What is your opinion of his argument?