

Protecting Our Commons

Water, forests, and other natural “commons” provide the necessities of life. Shared stories, music, and knowledge enliven our cultures. Today, corporations are trying to enclose these and other commons—or externalize their costs onto them. But a movement is gaining momentum to protect our commons for generations to come.

Sarah van Gelder and Doug Pibel

FORESTS & WILDLIFE

Why: Forests offer food, fiber, energy, medicines, habitat, oxygen, and climate stabilization.

Threats: Logging, petroleum, and mining corporations convert these commons to short-term private profits, leaving behind eroded land and poisoned water, air, and earth.

Signs of Progress: Ecuador plans to preserve a forested indigenous area by leaving the area's oil unexploited. Forest area certified as sustainable is up 45% in one year to 68 million hectares in 66 countries. Sweden has cut pesticide use by 68% over 12 years.

CYBERSPACE

Why: The Internet is key to accessing and distributing information and mobilizing civil society within and across borders.

Threats: Telecom and cable companies seek to commercialize the Internet and make some websites more accessible than others.

Signs of Progress: Over 200 groups, ranging from the ACLU to Gun Owners of America are working to protect “net neutrality.” Community WiFi helps overcome the digital divide.

OCEANS

Why: Diverse fish species are a critical protein source. Climate stability depends on healthy oceans.

Threats: Corporate overfishing and climate change are destroying stocks and habitat worldwide.

Signs of Progress: Protection of swordfish led to recovery. Australia is protecting 33% of the Great Barrier Reef.

GENES & SEEDS

Why: Genetic diversity makes for stable, resilient supplies of food, fiber, and natural medicines; protects ecosystems.

Threats: Corporations patent genes, push monocultures, seek to control seeds, introduce GMO strains into the food supply and the wild.

Signs of Progress: Resurgence of support for local, non-corporate farming. Consumer and farmer resistance to GMOs and pesticides.

KNOWLEDGE

Why: Knowledge grows with the free flow of information.

Threats: Patents on publicly funded research leads to monopoly pricing. High cost of information and technology creates digital divide.

Signs of Progress: Wikis, the Creative Commons, open-source software, and “Open Education Resources” offer low-cost resources built by a global community.

SPACE

Why: The wonders of space belong to everyone.

Threats: The U.S. plans the militarization of space.

Signs of Progress: A global ethic holds that space belongs to everyone.

BROADCAST SPECTRUM

Why: Communication is critical to a functioning democracy and community identity.

Threats: Privatization and consolidation restrict access to those with deep pockets.

Sign of Progress: The U.S. public demands funding for public broadcasting; FCC to allocate spectrum to noncommercial radio; public interest voices getting heard on media.

FOLK WAYS

Why: Music and stories are critical to community, connection, cultural understanding, and change.

Threats: Mass culture homogenizes folk traditions, turns public material into copyrighted works, “encloses” new works, impedes further evolution.

Signs of Progress: Creative Commons, the Internet, alternative media enhance diversity and creativity.

PUBLIC SPACES

Why: The town square is where we go to meet, debate, and celebrate.

Threats: Malls and privatization of public and open spaces limit interactions that build community.

Signs of Progress: Movements to protect urban gardens, parks, green belts, and town squares can be found worldwide.

WATER

Why: Fresh water is a right and a necessity.

Threats: Pollution, dams, privatization, water bottling, factory farms, waste, and climate change threaten supply.

Signs of Progress: Global resistance to privatization, rainwater harvesting, watershed protection, water conservation.

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Read more about the movement to protect our commons in the Fall 2007 issue of YES! Magazine, **Stand Up to Corporate Power**. Back copies at YesMagazine.org/store.

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