

A project of the [Alliance for Democracy](#) created by Jan Edwards of the [California Center for Community Democracy](#)

The Presentation Script

an outline for a 2 hour presentation of the Tapestry of the Commons:

Before the talk:

Before the audience arrives, put up a magnet board marked as a spectrum of Common Wealth to Private Property with magnet words for the audience to place where they feel they should go on a spectrum. The audience can work this exercise as they gather in the room. In addition or alternately the group could play the Spectogram exercise.

The Presentation:

What are the Commons?

The Commons are as old as the earth. The Commons are all the creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and freely, and hold in trust for future generations.

Lets start with a very brief, eurocentric, history of the commons.

The Romans had three types of property:

res privatae, which consisted of things that could be possessed by an individual or family;
res publicae, things built or set aside for public use by the state like roads and public buildings; and
res communes, were the things used by all, like air, water and wild animals.

In the United Kingdom during the Middle Ages, the commons were shared lands used by villagers for foraging, hunting, planting crops, and gathering wood. In 1215, the Magna Carta established forests and fisheries as res communes; resources available to all.

Feudal society in England was a strict hierarchy; lords and masters [those with property] over serfs without property. Many serfs escaped into the forest commons to avoid oppression. This was the basis of the Robin Hood stories.

Starting in the 15th and continuing through the mid-17th century, the landed gentry “enclosed” the commons; literally fenced the forests and grazing lands. These lands had been used by the common people for growing food, grazing animals for food and wool. The age old planting practices of the many were replaced by crops planted for the profit of the few.

The peasants were forced off the land and into wage slavery, by the enclosing of the commons.

Around this time the English prison system was developed to deal with the many displaced peasants whose desperation began to be seen as criminal by the elites.

In 1649, a group of poor men gathered on St. George’s Hill in Surrey and began to dig. They planted carrots, parsnips and beans as a way to reclaim the common land. It has been said that within 10 days their numbers had grown to 4 or 5 thousand. The Diggers ordered the lords of the manor to stop cutting down “our common woods and trees...for your private use.” Sound familiar? The Diggers were beaten by landowners and their houses were burned. They were charged with trespassing and arrested. By the end of the year, the Diggers were forced from St George’s Hill and dispersed.

Today, corporations are the lords. And they are enclosing the world’s commons. Under corporate influence, national governments and trade organizations are out to fence off, or “privatize”, all the profit making segments of the commons. Here is one example of this new enclosure movement. Before being allowed to join NAFTA, the Mexican government was required to revoke the claim to the traditional land granted to the peasants. The land was re-privatized leading to the Zapatista uprising. The indigenous people knew the value of what they were losing, and they banded together to fight back.

But most of us don't even know what we have, and what we are losing. We don't think in terms of common wealth. We are so used to being fenced out, we don't even notice the fences. The Native Americans saw what was happening and they tried to warn us. But most of us could not understand; because as this country was colonized, so were our minds.

So lets take a look at what can or should be our common wealth. There are two parts to the commons. The Natural Commons and the Cultural Commons. The cultural commons are the gifts from our human ancestors to all of humankind. But first we will start by looking at the Natural Commons: the gifts, both seen and unseen, from Nature to all her creatures.

[Hanging of first 15 ribbons]

On this tapestry frame we will weave the ribbons representing the different areas of the commons. I realize that all commons will not be represented by a ribbon, but hopefully most of them will find a home under one of the categories. If you hold a ribbon marked 1 through 15, be ready to come up to the frame and hang your ribbon vertically to warp our tapestry. Our weaving helper _____ will be standing by to help you if needed and to steady the frame. This frame is strong like the willow, not like the oak.

So we will begin. [the list of things under the "gifts" category will tell you what is included in each ribbon]

SKY...as the ribbon is hung, lets look at the gifts of this common? What does the sky gives us all, both seen and unseen?

[referring to Gifts from Nature chart] It gives us Air, Atmosphere, it provides the Ozone Layer, and UV protection... Anything else? [take call outs from audience of other gifts in each ribbon category] Continue using chart until all 15 Natural Commons ribbons are hung. Note: Paper flip chart could be blank except ribbon words, and let audience do all calling out with presenter holding a cheat sheet in case the audience draws a blank. Some explanation may helpful for ribbons like "Cycles" and "Quiet"]

Isn't it amazing how many gifts we have from our Nature Commons. And you also will notice that these commons and their gifts are interdependent: There is no Air without Forests and no Forests without Land. No Animals without Plants and no life at all without Water. We know we cannot protect the spotted owl without its tree, or save the tree, but not the land it stands on, or protect anything living without also protecting its water supply. The Natural Commons are an all or nothing proposition. All the Natural Commons must be held together as the Common Wealth or the value and integrity of the whole will be diminished or destroyed.

But we are only half finished with our tapestry. We need to weave in the Cultural Commons. These are the Gifts of our Ancestors and include more current human contributions. They are for all humans to use and add to as they can. Unlike the Natural Commons which started out with complete abundance, and are finite; the Cultural Commons began with nothing, at the beginning of human culture, and have been growing rapidly ever since. The only restrictions on the size and number of Cultural Commons are the ones we put on them by law. The Cultural Commons have a profound effect on the Natural Commons, putting pressures and values onto different Natural Commons throughout history. Be aware of how the Cultural Commons effect the Natural Commons. [For example, How does Knowledge of science change how we think of Energy or Airwaves or Minerals. How does Media effect Quiet, etc.]

These ribbons will be hung horizontally, and woven in and out of the Natural Commons. Do you all remember how to do this? Ok lets start, and although there are too many to mention, hopefully we can find a place for most of the basic Cultural Commons within these 15 ribbons.

LANGUAGE...what are the gifts relating to language given to us by our ancestors?

[Continue using chart as before until the last ribbon]

BUSINESS... This is a chance to look closely at Business and how it owes all that it is to the Cultural Commons. So lets start out thinking about early trading culture all the way to today's business practices.

[All ribbons are now hung]

Look at that...isn't it beautiful. This is all ours. We are really wealthy, we have this Common Wealth. We are like the planet's trust fund kids. And guess what? We have been acting just like some of the most careless and thoughtless of trust fund kids. Because the whole idea of most trust funds, and especially of this trust fund, is to not spend the principle. In fact, we should be trying to grow the principle, so we can hand this trust over to the next generations richer than we received it.

Each year the human population on the planet grows, so each individual human's piece of the Commons pie diminishes. Although some of us take more because are able to buy it. And we must not forget, the rest of planet's creatures also have claims to the Natural Commons; all life depends on the Commons. So we need to look at the condition of this Common Wealth of ours.

We have all heard a lot about environmental harms: Pollution, depletion, species extinction, lack of sustainability... need I go on? But other threats to the commons come by removing or stealing parts of the commons. Privatization means taking something from the commons or the public trust and giving it over to "private" interests either corporate or individual. There is great pressure to privatize everything imaginable, from public schools to municipal water systems. It is part of a value system that says Private Property is better than Common or Public Property; that citizens are consumers; and that commons are commodities. Those who hold these values believe it is better to take our common wealth and give it to a private company or individual. And, Better for who? Not better for you and me or the redwood trees and not better for the commons as a whole. But much better, financially, for the corporation on the receiving end.

The corporate interests claim rights to vast areas of the commons. They grab the profits by taking all the valuable things they can from the commons, but the don't want to pay the costs like cleaning up pollution, recharging aquifers, or protecting species. We call this Corporatization: when corporations privatize profits and externalize costs. They want the profitable parts of the commons to be private and the costs to be back in the commons. It's a sweet deal for the wealthy few, but a disaster for the commons and for the rest of us.

In the last few decades a new threat to the commons has developed in the form of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization (WTO) which work together to promote the interests of corporations. By promoting privatization and deregulation, they take the common wealth of the many and transfer it to the few. Organizations like the WTO give the power to decide what to take from the commons and give to giant corporations to the giant corporations themselves. Talk about the fox running the henhouse! Even powerful national governments have no say if they want to be part of the WTO. After taking the profits from the commons they dump the clean-up cost back onto the commons. When activists say this so called "free trade" is unfair to the environment and labor, that means unfair to the commons and us the commoners.

So how does this play out? Lets count the commons crimes involved...see how many you can count in this story.

Exxon corporation takes oil from the commons...that's your oil and my oil, too...for which they pay almost nothing. Of course they have pumping costs, exploration and machinery costs, and some oil leases are required sometimes...but basically the oil is free. They put it on a ship and use our common sea lanes, to transport it to a refinery, Burning oil to transport oil, and eventually it goes into a power plant which burns the oil causing greenhouse gasses that cause global warming. Sometimes there is an accident and the ship loses oil. The oil spill kills birds and fish and seals and messes up the beaches for years to come. The Exxon Corporation is fined, but not enough to pay for the clean-up and the public tax dollars and countless volunteer hours are spent...but the spill is never completely cleaned up. Exxon blames the ship's captain and carries on making lots of profit. And because of the "oil depletion allowance" the oil company also pays no taxes.

How many commons crimes? [max 8 or 9 depending how one counts]

Here's another one. Monsanto corporation takes corn from the commons and develops a strain of Round-up ready, herbicide resistant corn, which it patents. Much of the research came from publically funded universities, but the product developed is owned by the corporation. When the corn is grown in the fields, it can be sprayed with herbicides and the weeds will be killed and the corn will survive. The GMO corn cross-pollinates with the organic corn in a neighboring farmer's field and the farmer's crop is contaminated and the farmer is charged with

planting the patented GMO corn without paying. Seed saving of GMO corn is also prohibited. Round-up ready weeds develop and soon there are super weeds that require even more spraying of Round-up. It is discovered that the decline in the frog population is due to Round-up in the water where they breed. Monsanto corporation forces all the countries of the world to accept their GMO crops, and continue to make profits. To prevent local communities from protecting themselves from these harms by passing legislation to ban GMO crops, Monsanto joins with other giant corporations to bribe state legislators to pass laws prohibiting local control.

How many common crimes? [9 max]

OK one more from the cultural commons. This time you don't need to count.

Disney corporation took from the commons: animation, film, theme parks, broadcast networks, housing developments, toys and mice. They also took most of their story ideas straight out of the commons. How many of the Disney movies can you name that came from the commons and how many story ideas did Disney give back to the commons?

Don't know all, but here are 19: Aladdin, Atlantis, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, Davy Crockett, Legend of Sleepy Hollow, Hercules, Hunchback of Notre Dame, Jungle Book, Oliver Twist, Pinocchio, Pocahontas, Robin Hood, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Swiss Family Robinson, Three Musketeers, Treasure Island, Wind in the Willows

Put back into the commons? Zero

So back to our tapestry, I wonder if this is really an accurate picture of what we have in the commons today? Things seem to be in bad condition. Lets think about the status of the SKY...what's going on with these gifts? Should we unweave part of the ribbon? How far do you think it is unwoven?

[Using Status column on charts plus call outs, weaving helper unweaves the ribbon when each one is discussed.]

This is not a very pretty picture. The commons are polluted, privatized, corporatized, and under the control of global trade organizations. And we, the trustees of this amazing wealth, don't even act as though we have a say in any of it.

What can we do to reclaim our birthright and restore the commons?

Recognize the commons as a real thing. Thinking of all the parts of the commons as an interwoven tapestry and as a set of gifts is a beginning. Environmentalists for a long time have recognized the entire ecosystem as the unit we need to protect, and the commons thinking builds on that. As a world society, we need to have a discussion about the commons and decide what must be included.

The commons should have legal status and recognition. They have some already and there is a history of the commons in law. This should be strengthened and built upon. All the people have a right to determine how best to protect the commons.

We as a world society need to rethink the concepts of property and common wealth. Then we can decide the best ways to meet the world's needs, while protecting the commons.

Western societies should look to other world views on property for different ideas. The people of Cochibamba, Bolivia took to the streets and won the right to keep their water in the commons. The Zapatista's demanding the return of their common land.

And we can look to the past for ideas that can be retooled for the world today.

The Diggers in England were part of a larger movement in the 1600's called The Levelers Movement. Besides the Diggers, the Levelers movement included the Anabaptists, the Quakers, the Anitnomians, the Familists and Ranters, and the New Model Army. The Levelers reality was the commons and so they called for changes in their society that are unrecognizable and totally radical today. They advocated the abolition of buying and selling, which would result in the absence of property, in a possessive, legal sense. This would greatly reduce the

need for judges and lawyers and also the coercive state. But the Levelers did not have an environmental vision nor did they face the huge environmental problems of today.

Maybe we are ready for a new movement to protect the commons. We could call ourselves The Commoners. What do you think?

Of course, some of us should continue working on the burning issues as they come up. But that doesn't mean we can't re-frame our issue work to address our demand for commons recognition and protection. It could strengthen the issue by connection to a bigger vision. For example, when the community of Gualala was faced with the water bag issue...a company wanted to syphon water from the river and float it in giant bags to San Diego... Some activists wanted to oppose it strictly on regulatory grounds concerning the amount of water reserved for endangered fish. This was tried and true. But others took a broader view, and began to assert that water was not a commodity but a common, that the water in the river that flowed to the sea was not "wasted water" but part of the water cycle. That local watersheds should have control over local water, not a foreign corporation. It made a local water bag discussion global in scope. Citizens were truly able to think globally and act locally in the most effective way.

So here are 2 exercises to choose from. You can go into whichever group you like. One group will work on re-framing local issues to reflect a commons perspective. The other group will do a visioning exercise on the new Commoners Movement. We have charts for both groups to help you get started. Lets meet back in 15 minutes to see what you have to report.

[The presenter can choose to do one or the other exercise, or let the group vote if they don't want to do both. Presenter can visit each group or helpers can be in each group. When they come back to report, steer the group towards future actions]

Do any of you want to get together in the near future to continue this work of Reclaiming the Commons in your area? We will pass around a sign up sheet. Is there a volunteer among you who will take the names and convene the first meeting? Before we leave, I would like to explain what we have on the table as hand outs...

Any final questions? [take as many as seems right] Thanks for coming and good luck with your actions!

Script by Jan Edwards 2005

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