

**TIMES  
EVOKE**

A PIECE OF WATER,  
A HANDFUL OF SHADE

The idea of 'the commons' was first outlined in 1833 by William Lloyd, an English economist, discussing grazing in shared rural areas. Amidst today's high-tech living, English villages and sunny pastures might seem quaint. Yet, modern Western civilisation is rooted in this discussion for the commons led to maintaining three realms, private and state-run property alongside resources shared by all. Today, UNESCAP defines the 'global environmental commons' as the high seas, the atmosphere, Antarctica and space, plus biomes within national borders whose thriving — this includes rainforests, land and biodiversity — is vital for the planet. India has a rich history of commons, from village ponds and forests to lakes, pastures and ancient trees, used by communities for resources and recreation.

Such commons are under grave threat globally now, the Anthropocene embodying their over-exploitation by a few. The 'tragedy of the commons' speaks in grim statistics — UNEP finds plastic in the seas measures 199 million tons, turning the azure into marine 'dead zones'. As nations discharge emissions into a shared atmosphere, WHO finds 99% of the global population breathes dangerous air. Untrammelled urbanisation, mining and ranching are causing huge deforestation and erosion — the World Atlas of Desertification estimates 75% of Earth's land is degraded, the UN fearing soil desertification could impact two billion people by 2030. Meanwhile, the biodiversity extinction rate is hundreds of times higher than in the last ten million years, Earth losing birds, animals, insects and plants at extraordinary speed. Mauling the natural world generates a vicious cycle — as we overdraw on the elements, we lose natural resources and the species which rejuvenate nature itself.

However, solutions are still possible. As Times Evoke's global experts emphasise, these are ingrained in appreciating the importance of the commons. From this awareness can stem more sustainable behaviour, including concerted global action on stemming pollution and deforestation, expanding agroforestry and habitat restoration, creating protected areas for biodiversity and replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy. Alongside, it is vital to empower communities to manage commons equitably, these being the only places in the world where everyone has a right to some water, some shade.

# 'From water to air, the global commons must be managed with rules — and climate justice'

Sunita Narain is director general of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). Speaking to Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, she discusses the global commons, their 'tragedy' — and potential:

**What does 'global commons' mean?**

■ This refers to shared resources — the biggest issue around which this became a point of policy is the atmosphere. In 1991, Anil Agarwal and I wrote a report titled 'Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism'. This was based on the idea that we are all dealing with a common resource, namely the environment. Our understanding emerged from our research in India where we studied common property resources in villages, such as grazing lands and forests. One of our biggest learnings was that to sustainably manage such commons, you need rules and cooperation, based on fairness — if a farmer who rears goats, for instance, doesn't get a portion of the produce from the commons, they will let their goats graze there, thereby damaging shared resources. We argued that it was crucial to address the atmospheric commons with the same principles of equity and cooperation.



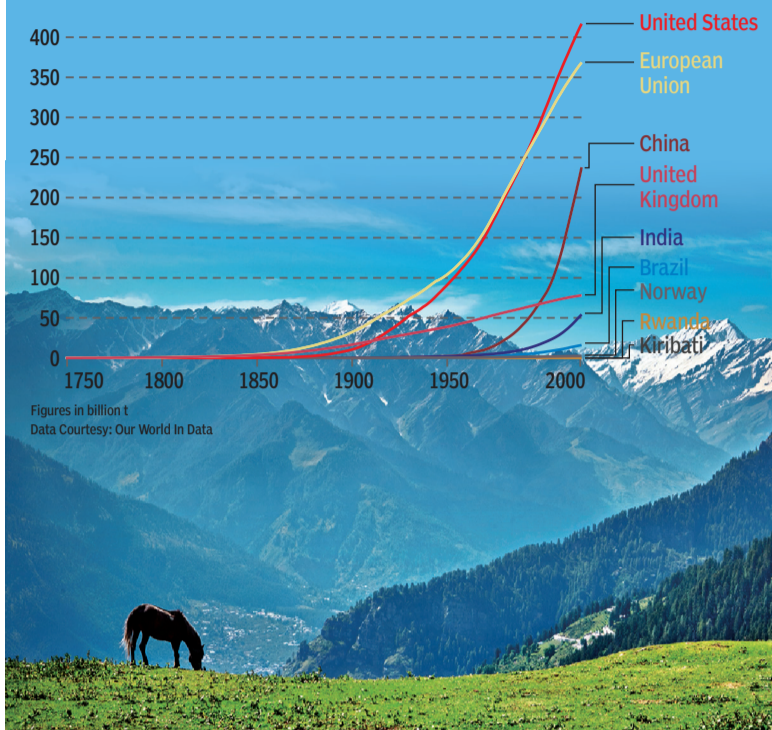
The global commons shows we are entirely interconnected — if one country has emitted, this impacts others. Without principles of fairness, we can't hope for cooperation and countries to cut emissions at the scale needed. Initially, the 'global commons' idea was only applied to the oceans, with the Convention on the Seas the first discussion around this. But the world didn't come together for a serious discussion here, the larger part of the oceans situated in the global commons still being unregulated, which is why the crises of plastics,



**DEEP TRAGEDY:** The globally shared seas are polluted by all but tended by few

**LEARNING TO SHARE AND CARE**

The sustainable management of common natural resources, like pastures in developing economies, holds lessons for rich, industrialised nations which over-exploited their fair share of the world's resources, even causing emissions (below) to the point of global warming



over-fishing and oil pollution continue.

**What do 'the tragedy of the commons' and 'natural debt' mean?**

■ The first describes what ensues without shared management systems where everyone agrees to cooperate. Grazing lands, forests and common water bodies in villages are enduring examples — if we don't have a system of governance where everyone who is a member of the community (and this can be a collective of nations, residents in a colony or a village) agrees to abide by certain rules, there will be a tragedy of the commons where people will pollute ponds or overuse forests. Importantly, 'the commons' exist everywhere — they are also, say,

the roads everyone uses. These need rules too which should be adhered to with discipline, a system of management, deterrence and cooperation. This is predicated on fairness — if everyone using roads understands that the rules apply to all equally, it gives people confidence in the system. Deterrence must also be applied across the board — you can't penalise a small polluter, for instance, but let a big polluter get away. These rules must be founded on cooperation — for the global commons, nations must agree on how to preserve shared resources. Without that, tragedies unfold.

The concept of 'natural debt' emerged in the 1990s, explaining how some countries have overdrawn on their

share of the global commons. Consider the United States which occupies a huge portion of the world's carbon budget, way beyond its fair share. It has overdrawn on natural capital to build financial capital — but its natural debt, just like a financial debt, needs to be paid for.

**Does this idea have relevance for climate equity and environmental justice?**

■ Absolutely. Climate justice is fundamentally based on the management of the global commons. This is no moralistic issue — how the global commons has been treated must lie at the heart of cooperation among nations, guiding ambitious climate agreements now.

**Going forward, what kinds of international pacts would be most effective in preserving the shared global commons?**

■ We should revisit 1991's climate agreement. That was based on the principle of equity, saying there was a common but differentiated responsibility among countries and developed economies needed to act first while rules would be made for other nations, based on their use of the global commons. That was taken forward by the Kyoto Protocol, with the same principle recognising the responsibilities and contributions of countries, which would help set their emissions reduction targets.

However, this was inconvenient for some rich polluters in the world — hence, the 2015 Paris Agreement was reached



**THIS WILL ECHO:** Deforestation anywhere has ecological impacts across the planet

which essentially says everybody should cut emissions as much as they can but has no abiding rule-based governance. We urgently need this — consider the

**THE COMMONS & YOU**

● We consume **coffee at home, work and for recreation** — but over-consumption is causing severe **habitat loss** and endangering 60% of the plant's species. Alongside, coffee's carbon footprint isn't light. With non-organic farming, processing, packaging, transport, etc., **one pound of roasted coffee produces 11 pounds of carbon** — ensure you're drinking **sustainably grown coffee**

● **Water** is a shared resource — and often, tragically wasted. A **ten-minute shower takes over 1,00,000 glasses of drinking water**, even while water scarcity impacts four billion people worldwide. Ensure you **fix leaky faucets and control lawn watering times** — a **lighter diet will also help**, with a meat burger demanding over 1,600 litres of water

● Everyone likes new clothes — but **85% of all textiles reach dumps each year**, one garbage truck of clothes being burned each second. Think before you discard — **making one cotton shirt takes 700 gallons**, enough for one person to drink eight cups per day for over three years

Research: UNEP, Harvard Business School, WEF



Research: UNEP, Harvard Business School, WEF

discussions on whether India should contribute to the loss and damage fund. This is unbelievable because India is not a major emitter — in terms of scale of emissions or its contribution to the total carbon emitted in the world, even till 2030, there is no way India can be on the list of big polluters. We need rule-based governance around the global commons, including an acceptance that a finite amount of CO2 can be emitted into the world's atmosphere to keep temperatures under 1.5°C. This sum must be divided globally, based on nations' per capita, etc. It should then be understood that if a country has exceeded its share, it must cut by a certain amount and it can also trade and buy from other countries' share. That would allow for a proper rule-based system to help mitigate climate change.



**SO COMMON,  
SO RARE**

● Residing in **wetlands** (even inside cities) and rainforests, the **capybara** is the **largest rodent on Earth** — it **weighs over 100 pounds** and stands **two feet tall**. Native to **South America**, the gregarious capybara, which lives in small, organised herds, is an **excellent swimmer**. This intelligent herbivore evades its predators by jumping into water bodies where it can **hold its breath for over five minutes**



● The **roseate spoonbill** is found in the **mangroves of South Florida, coastal Texas and southwestern Louisiana**. These stunning birds earned their name due to their **beautiful light-pink pelage** and distinctive bill — their **spoon-shaped mouth** helps them scoop up insects, molluscs and plants from mangroves, scientists in fact ascribing their shading to a **diet of crustaceans**

● The **blue sheep** is found in **Ladakh's alpine pastures and rocky hills**, living between the snows and trees — this enigmatic creature **grazes like a sheep but clammers up high cliffs** like a goat. Blessed with sharp eyesight, hearing and a sense of smell, the blue sheep expertly forages herbs and shrubs to eat — to add to its mystery, **its coat turns reddish-brown during the warmer months**



Research: National Geographic, IUCN, WWF, Smithsonian Magazine

## 'The commons must include many neglected species'

**Mahesh Rangarajan** is professor of history and environmental studies at Ashoka University. Speaking to Times Evoke, he discusses both past patterns — and the future growth — of commons:

Unlike open-access areas, commons generally have a broad set of rules which their members agree on. Considerable evidence shows cooperation for the common good exists in such



**A SUSTAINABLE CATCH:** Traditional fisher groups treat shared seas with both deep knowledge and respect

spaces. This has great relevance in the current ecological crisis. A good example is the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh, identified with its charismatic leader, Chandi Prasad Bhatt. This collective, established in Gopeshwar in today's Uttarakhand, led to the iconic Chipko movement. However, it didn't just protect forests, it also had a remark-

able program of replanting oak and broad-leaf species through voluntary labour.

Another interesting example is found in Divya Karnad's work on the Konkan and Coromandel coasts — here, collective fisher systems have panchayats with unwritten but strict norms on who can fish when, what species to catch, which is a closed season and so on. These sustainable regulations developed through local trial and error and an intimate knowledge of the ecosystem itself, of ocean currents, the behaviour of fish, etc.

There are well-managed commons in other countries as well. Nepal has a very advanced participatory forest system and over the last thirty years, there has been a successful revival of commons through multiple partnerships, leading to significant re-greening. Mexico also has a highly sophisticated system of community forests. When based on broad common rights and guaranteed land use terms (meaning people know the land won't be brought under cultivation or mining), maintaining the commons brings great ecological advantages, from building a carbon sink to having vegetation bind the soil, enabling better water recharging or reviving biodiversity.

In India, commons include pastures, forests and fisheries. Many don't have legal recognition though as the law provides for individual ownership. There are provisions for community forests in some states but these are often under-funded. Yet, there are committed groups like the Deccan Development

Society working as alliances for restoration.

There are broadly two kinds of commons in India. A village could have grazing grounds with the land tenure system noting this as common land that isn't owned by any one person, group or family. The other is community forests where the land is owned by the government but it forges agreements with people nearby to use and protect it. So, the community has both rights to harvest the space and obligations to maintain it.

Historically in India, the larger imperial forest bureaucratic system was about state management and control. Today, this approach must evolve because climate change cannot be tackled only by governments, corporates or large organisations — mitigation and adaptation must be a ground-up initiative, mediated by local actors. The potential of the commons is immense here. The late Nobel Laureate economist Elinor Ostrom did exemplary work on how to best govern the commons, emphasising the role of cooperation and communication by members. Narpal S. Jodha, another great scholar, showed how the people who depend most on the commons are the underclasses who need fodder, firewood, herbs and so on. The capture of these spaces by others impacts them most adversely. We need to recognise that the commons through time were not always ideal or a perfect village republic. But these were — and are — working systems and we should both learn from them and reform them.

Alongside humans, birds and animals have a very important place in the commons as well. It is important to remember these spaces aren't just for extracting resources but to keep ecosystems productive. This needs a penumbra of biodiversity, from animals and birds to herbs, shrubs, grasses and scrubs, for the natural cycle — nitrogen recycling, fruit and seed dispersal, water recharging, etc. — to work. For this, we must recognise the contribution of other species. Going forward, scholars must explore how to make these areas more inclusive, both in terms of marginalised people — and neglected species.

## 'India's urban commons give joy — they must be freed from a colonial approach'

**Harini Nagendra** teaches ecology and sustainability at Azim Premji University. She tells Times Evoke about the impacts of protecting — and blocking — urban commons:

Communities access commons for water, wood and fodder as well as recreation and communing with nature. Communities also have some formal or informal say over area management here in terms of rules of access, cleanliness, etc. We often think of commons in India as rural, taking the form of forests or ponds — in the city, we imagine areas are either privately-owned or held by the state. However, there are commons in cities too, providing us with equity, health and happiness.

These can encompass a sacred tree with a platform around it — people can sit there, talk and play games. This could be a lake where people walk or jog or a park where children play and elders share stories. Our cities are unequal and often anonymous — the commons are where people get to know each other, feel familiar and learn to collaborate. The barriers between our origins and identities often dissolve there.

Historically, the commons in Bengaluru included lakes, parks, informal sacred spaces, etc. — people used lakes to fish in, graze animals and grow crops alongside utilising these as community gathering places. But, as the city grew, these began being treated as dumping grounds — sewage and garbage got thrown there and construction filled up the wetlands. This began when Bengaluru switched from using local water to piped water coming from distant sources — the need to keep our lakes clean ended. Many parks survived but got gated, some with entry fees — even if this is five rupees, a low-income person with a family of four can't pay that regularly. Some parks restrict access, say, between 10 AM



**A LAKE FOR ALL:** Urban waterbodies are often used by both walkers and washerfolk

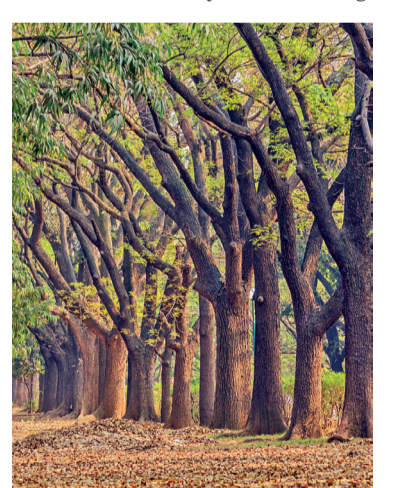
until 4 PM — this means children from small government schools which lack playgrounds have nowhere to play.

Alongside such social aspects, the environmental fall-out of closing the commons is huge. Consider Bengaluru's floods last year — their devastating impacts were linked precisely to such spaces. Commons are government-owned — the ones being restored require state money which goes towards paving and changing the 'look' of lakes and parks through concretisation. Many wetlands have thereby become cemented parking or even been handed over to builders, several becoming prime real estate for apartments, malls and offices. This has been carried out with no thought for environmental impacts — that explains why the flooding was so harsh in these particular areas where natural seepage and drainage systems were blocked off.

The colonial signature around urban commons also persists — using these for grazing, fishing or washing clothes is still considered 'unsightly', with the lingering notion that the people who do these activities should be evicted, making space for the wealthy. Yet, the original knowledge custodians of the commons were the grazers and fishers who still work at lake restoration and maintenance. They know lake inlets and outlets, how much garbage gets dumped daily, how to clear blockages, etc. Instead of treating them as hindrances, they should be viewed as allies in maintaining — and using — the urban commons.

Elinor Ostrom, the Nobel Laureate I worked with, studied Bengaluru's commons, developing insights on how these can be managed sustainably. One important theme was polycentricity — communities can do

some things but not others. A community near a commons can stop dumping there but can't actually act against a polluter or encroacher — this is where the government and courts must step in. This is also where multi-level collaboration, like a federation of citizens' groups trading information, helps. Elinor also stressed that in Indian cities which are growing so fast, with so many different actors, polycentricism or a multiplicity of state actors is beneficial because you will find an officer somewhere who'll be helpful. She further felt it was important communities believe they have some long-



**A MOMENT OF PEACE:** Parks provide many with calm amidst a bustling city

term rights over these resources — if they think the trees they tend, for instance, can arbitrarily be cut down to widen a road, they won't do this. Yet, urban residents yearn to revive, protect and enjoy the commons — for everyone's well-being, they should be given a long-term stake in doing so.

**COMMON HISTORIES**

**A BELOVED CITY**

**READERS WRITE**

Dear Times Evoke,  
I cherish reading Times Evoke which gives wonderful information about nature. The beautifully presented article on 'The Living Museum' (18th February) was very interesting. We should indeed take our children for walks in parks where we can currently point out calls by barbets, hornbills, etc. As TE said, it's also our responsibility to ensure kids learn to love nature.  
—Vipan Gupta, Delhi

'The Living Museum' in TE invoked curiosity and awe. Why go to distant resorts seeking nature? A very sensible suggestion when there is a treasure trove of fascinating creatures all around us! This excellent book should be included in school curriculums. Thank you for a superb piece, TE, and well done to these gifted authors!  
—Usha Ponnappa, Bengaluru

I loved reading about 'The Living Museum' in TE. This project can create empathy for birds, plants and insects among children who now risk being distanced from nature. TE, you are such a great initiative by TOI to bring us amazing knowledge about the environment!  
—Rashmi Narayanswamy, Pune

Sanjay Sondhi's article on Himalayan birds (11th Feb) was such an insightful and inspiring read, tracing his own journey as a change-maker. Let's learn from him, rewild green patches and curb our own carbon footprint at every step instead of waiting for policies to make a difference. Thank you, TE, for making each Saturday so special!  
—Shruti Chatterjee, Kolkata

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