

International Journal of the Commons
Vol. 8, no 1 February 2014, pp. 259–260
Publisher: Igitur publishing
URL: <http://www.thecommonsjournal.org>
URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-116089
Copyright: content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License
ISSN: 1875-0281

Book Review

John M. Anderies and Marco A. Janssen. 2013. *Sustaining the Commons*. Center for the Study of Institutional Diversity, Arizona State University (ebook: <http://sustainingthecommons.asu.edu>).

Reviewed by: Giangiacomo Bravo, Department of Social Studies, Linnaeus University, Sweden.

A real handbook for commons undergraduates: this is something I have waited for, for years! It is true that *Rules, Games & Common-Pool Resources* (Ostrom et al. 1994) already provides a beautiful introduction to the topic. However, that book is not an easy read, and many students (along with some colleagues) had a hard time going through its more theoretical parts. *Sustaining the Commons* does not share this problem. It is easy to understand, clear and fairly complete: from Hardin's herders to the presentation of all major achievements of commons research.

The book is divided in five parts. The first part introduces the theoretical foundations of commons research, from social dilemmas to the IAD framework. The second one illustrates these foundations with the help of case studies. The third part focuses on human behaviour and presents findings from experimental research, both in the lab and in the field. The fourth section is centred on rules and on their "grammar". The final part applies the framework to some "new commons" and presents current research challenges.

The book is full of enjoyable examples. Its constant attention to linking theoretical research to practical applications is praiseworthy. Although "traditional commons", from pastures to water management, represent an important part of the book, a remarkable effort has been made to present examples closer to the daily experiences of the average student, ranging from public health to *Wikipedia*. This not only facilitates the reading but also helps to overcome the widespread view that commons are an old-fashioned topic. The reader is left with the strong feeling that commons lay at the core of many challenges of the contemporary world, which is not only true but also represents a fundamental message for students.

From this point of view, it is a shame that no specific part of the volume has been devoted to the global commons or, more generally, to large-scale ones. It is easy to understand why that is the case, since this particular subject is especially difficult to handle using the commons framework, as clearly discussed in the final chapter. However, the issue is just too important to be neglected, and many readers may be disappointed in not finding a comprehensive discussion of topics such as climate change or the loss of biodiversity at the global level.

A final remark concerns the constant attention given in the volume to linking institutional analysis with people's behaviour. This is reflected by the authors' choice to devote the whole third part to experimental research. Although case studies represent the core of commons research, the importance of experiments for theory development has been recognized by Ostrom herself (Ostrom 2006). The fact that *Sustaining the Commons* explicitly supports this view represents an important contribution in shaping a future generation of commons students that will be truly able to perform interdisciplinary studies and to choose among multiple methods in the design of their research.

Literature cited

- Ostrom, E. 2006. The Value-Added of Laboratory Experiments for the Study of Institutions and Common-Pool Resources. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 61:149–163.
- Ostrom, E., R. Gardner and J. Walker. 1994. *Rules, Games, and Common-Pool Resources*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.