

Introduction to Garrett Hardin's "Human Ecology: The Subversive, Conservative Science"

Richard J. Borden

Garrett Hardin alarmed the fledgling environmental movement with a cautionary tale, published in 1968 in *Science* magazine, about "the tragedy of the commons." The essay made the stark claim that environmental problems were the collective consequence of human action—rooted in unrestrained individual self-interest. For Hardin, the most daunting example of environmental destruction was population growth. This theme remained a central feature of his lifelong concerns about ecosystem carrying capacity, human overpopulation, reproductive rights, and "lifeboat ethics." His controversial ideas about overexploitation of common resources opened the door to a growing awareness that many environmental problems are problems of human beliefs and behavior. They were also a major impetus for the development of alternative models of sustainable development, consensual decision-making, and common property resource management.

Garrett Hardin's career as an ecologist began at the University of Chicago, where he studied under W. C. Allee. Following receipt of his PhD at Stanford, he joined the faculty of the University of California Santa Barbara in 1946—initially in zoology, but later as professor of human ecology—until his retirement in 1978.

When invitations for the First International Conference of the Society for Human Ecology were sent, we were pleased to draw participants from across the United States, Europe, and as far away as Australia. The meeting took place at the University of Maryland in April 1985. The following paper by Garrett Hardin, by then well into retirement, was among them. His delivery was characteristically forceful—and, perhaps, intentionally provocative as well. Nonetheless, it was a welcome addition to the Society for Human Ecology's launching as a professional society, and generated a lively discussion.

It is not easy to provide a simple summation of Garrett Hardin's contributions to human ecological thought. His positions often seemed contrary-minded, even contradictory. Hardin's ideas on birth control and abortion rights were at odds with the political right. His positions on immigration, food aid, and welfare were infuriating to the left. At the same time, his maxim that "we can never do merely one thing" has become something of an ecological truism. The following essay encapsulates the "hard realism" of Hardin's convictions. Whatever we may think of them, individually or together, they remain a potent stimulus within the history of human ecology.

This text is taken from *Human Ecology Review*,
Volume 23, Number 2, 2017, published 2017 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[dx.doi.org/10.22459/HER.23.02.2017.10](https://doi.org/10.22459/HER.23.02.2017.10)