

A WORKBOOK AND ONLINE COMMUNITY for Co-CREATING OUR SUSTAINABILITY ETHIC

Section VI – The Curve of Hope Chapter 2 - Tragedy of the Commons

Fourteenth century Britain was organized as a loosely aligned collection of villages, each with a common pasture for villagers to graze horses, cattle and sheep. Each household attempted to gain wealth by putting as many animals on the commons as it could afford. As the village grew in size and more and more animals were placed on the commons, overgrazing ruined the pasture. No stock could be supported on the commons thereafter. As a consequence of population growth, greed, and the logic of the commons, village after village collapsed.

<http://members.aol.com/trajcom/private/commons.htm>

How do we help everyone discern the Earth as our common source of life?

The quote above tells the story of an original use of the 'commons' and the dynamic of overuse that becomes the 'tragedy.' It is interesting to note that the inability to collaborate and develop an ethic of 'fair share' led to the formalization of private property rights. This is deeply embedded in our culture, so without thinking about it we are essentially discerning the Earth as a commodity.

There is the same general bandwidth for all the species on Earth in terms of both reliance and protection from the sun; sources of food; capacity to procreate; unpolluted water, air, and soil; oxygen to breathe; and radiation limits to name a few. And we are currently in the midst of one of the greatest mass extinctions in the history of the planet because, for one species after another, the bandwidth has been violated. Here are some of the reasons why the human species is threatened:

- Our technology for killing is so powerful that it can't be used without potentially annihilating ourselves;
- There is no doubt that the ingestion of pesticides and pollutants cause serious

health hazards;

- Global Warming is real, caused primarily by the Industrial Age - potentially devastating to millions;
- Our Western lifestyles exceed the 'carrying capacity' of the Earth; and
- Our capitalistic philosophy relies on growth, and nothing grows forever.

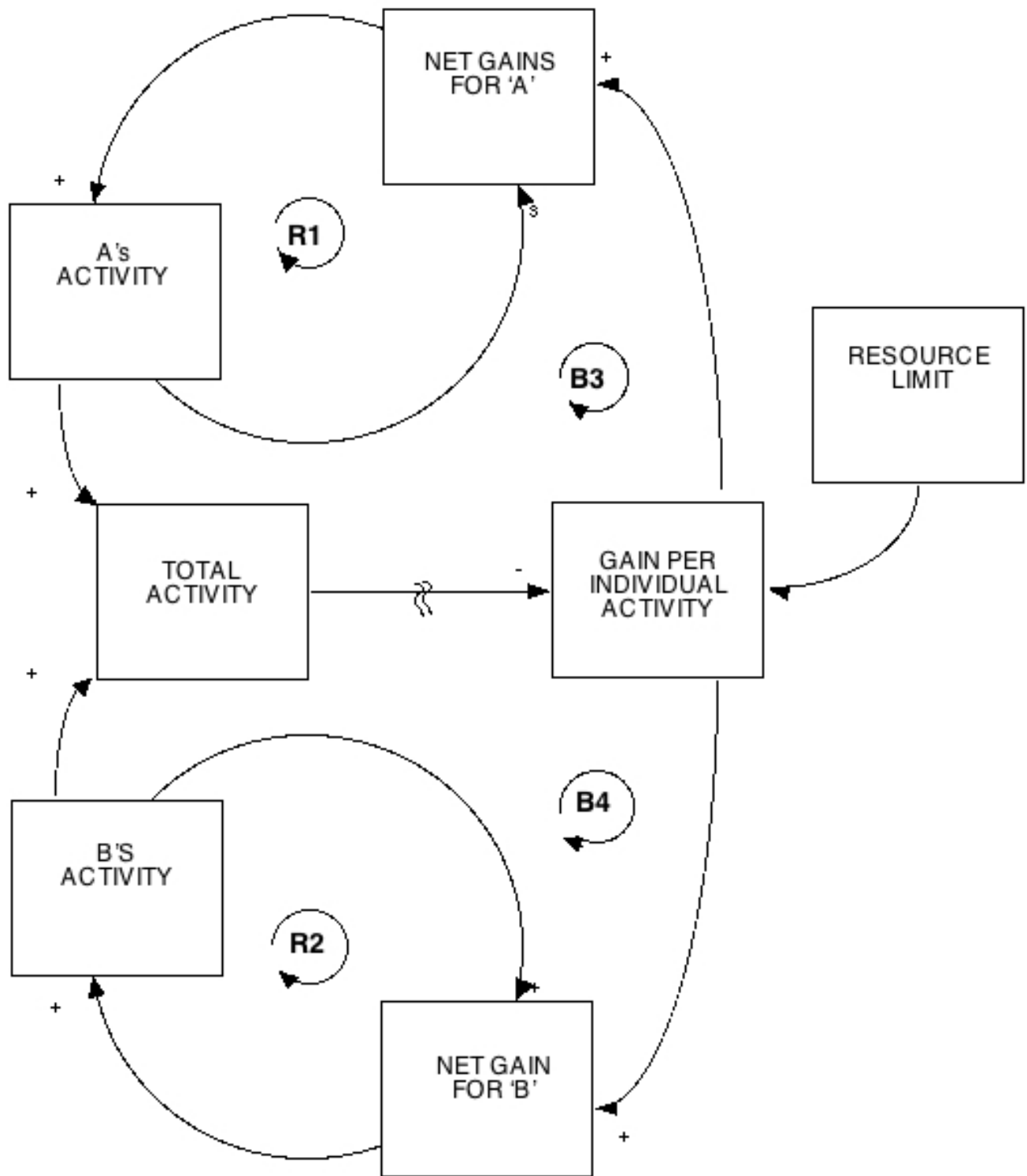
Below is the system archetype, 'The Tragedy of the Commons.' The reader may want to refer to '[Re-enforcing & Balancing Loops](#)' to better understand how these flows combine to create the 'Tragedy'. The magnitude of our problem is global rather than the local commons of European villages where everyone was allowed to graze their animals. If you spend a few minutes understanding the flows, you will see that each

person ('A' & 'B') initially benefits and is in a re-enforcing loop – for each participant, an increase in 'Gains' causes and increase in 'Activity', and

this causes an increase in 'Total Activity.' This continues until, over time, the commons is overgrazed, 'Gain per Individual decreases, and everyone loses'.

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TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS ARCHETYPE



Through TV and other communication devices, the more highly developed countries are exporting their way of life. People all over the planet aspire to the European and American standard of living. It is estimated that if each of the 6 billion inhabitants of the Earth utilized the same 'footprint' as the average American, it would take approximately five planet Earth's to support us. The problem is compounded if we look at a local effort to reduce the footprint of [Sonoma County](#), California. When they made a concerted effort to reduce, reuse and recycle, and

embraced other energy savings programs, the data made available in May of 2002 showed their footprint reduced to 22.4 acres per person – just 1.3 acres less than the American average of 23.7 acres, and still worse than the next worst country in the world. I point this out, not just to highlight severity and urgency, but to show that vastly new paradigms for living are necessary if we are to survive. As articulated in the chapter '[Yakoana](#)', we need to change the 'Dream of the North'.

Reflection

We are confronted each day with choices regarding our 'needs'. In the last few years most of us have become much more conscious of the resources it takes to create and support the choices we make. We are learning that it isn't enough to just be virtuous in terms of sharing and giving to others -- virtues that are integral to being in Global Community. We must also practice doing without – lessen our footprint and be a part of teaching and setting examples for others.

What serious changes are you contemplating in your life-style?

How committed are you to the establishment of a Global infinite game?

What are your feelings about sharing that which is scarce?