

# Tragedy of the Commons: An Old Fable for Modern Times

In early England, a commons was an area used by all – not privately owned. Pastures, for example, were commons areas available to anyone for grazing cattle. One day, a farmer thought he might increase his profits by quietly adding a cow to his herd. Would one more cow make a difference to the commons? Other farmers then quietly added cows, too.

Over time, the pastures became barren and overgrazed, and the cattle on the commons became puny and stunted. To make up for their losses, the herdsmen added more cattle to their herds. Things only got worse; the commons became wastelands, of no use to any herdsmen.

Is there a modern lesson here for our Northwoods lake country? History records many examples of the abuse and overuse of unrestricted commons areas. When private parties are left to their devices, commons areas can degrade until they become unusable and undesirable. That can happen to our lakes if we let it.

Wisconsin's Public Trust Doctrine treats the state's lakes and streams as commons areas – free for all to use. Some are in danger of becoming tragedies, through excessive development, pollution, and destruction of natural beauty and habitats.

How can these tragedies of the commons be prevented? By striking the right balance between free public use and preservation. We can all do our part by doing things that protect the waters and avoiding actions that would harm them. There's also a role for fair and reasonable regulation of our water commons. For example, protective shoreland zoning ordinances at the local and county levels help keep our lakes and rivers healthy.

Everyone must work together to achieve the needed balance. We value our lakes too much to let them become tragedies of the commons.

**One in a series of articles sponsored by the Oneida County Lakes and Rivers Association ([www.oclra.org](http://www.oclra.org)). For more information, contact Bob Martini at 715-282-5896 or email to [webmaster@oclra.org](mailto:webmaster@oclra.org). OCLRA encourages the use and distribution of this material by lake associations, their members, and other parties concerned about water quality.**

*When do the rights of landowners around lakes infringe on the rights of the people who own the water (all of us)? If non-regulation doesn't work, how much regulation is right?*

**OCLRA**

ONEIDA COUNTY  
Lakes and Rivers Association