

On the Commons

AN UPDATE ON NEW PROJECTS AND IDEAS WINTER 2011



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Occupy the Commons

The #Occupy movements that spread across the nation this fall are taking citizen activism in a new direction—toward the commons. The protests create actual commons, shared public spaces that have become both a symbol and an example of the more cooperative, hopeful future that will benefit 99 percent of Americans. That's why these action have been able to shift the political debate by galvanizing public support for a more equitable economy.

The occupiers are also experimenting with new forms of collaborative, commons-based, genuinely democratic decision-making based on mutual consensus and inclusiveness. And rather than an isolated band of protesters, the Occupy encampments depend on the continuing support of the broader community to keep going.

The tremendous and widespread growth of the commons movement over the last year is testimony to the resonance of this ancient concept as a fresh solution to 21st century problems: dire environmental threats, widening economic inequity, out of control corporate power along with increasing privatization and eradication of the public sphere.

That's why you hear about the commons at work in some surprising places—the business school at Notre Dame University, for instance. Professor Leo Burke, a former Motorola executive, has established the [Global Commons Initiative](#) to research the applications of the commons in today's economy and develop a curriculum about the subject for undergrads, MBA students and the general public. Burke emphasizes the commons is not some trendy idea, but a way of life rooted in Christian gospel, Catholic social teachings, Eastern Philosophy, in-

digenous beliefs and new breakthroughs from the frontiers of physics.

Prioritizing the common good over private economic gain, a core value of the commons, is also gaining ground. Elizabeth Warren, the champion of middle-class economic interests in the Obama Administration who is running for Senator in Massachusetts, was widely celebrated for truth-telling on the campaign trail when she stated [“there is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody.”](#)

Where Next? You never quite know where the commons will turn up. Jan Cohen-Cruz, director of [Imagining America](#)—a national consortium of universities and organizations dedicated to advancing the arts, humanities and design—explains, “the commons, though not a formal part of our institutional vocabulary, is an animating vision of Imagining America.”

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE GROWING COMMONS MOVEMENT

On the Commons fosters the emergence of a new worldview and a set of practices that promote a more commons-based society. We connect a rapidly growing network of people, organizations and ideas to each other as a way to animate a base of commons. Working together this network can collectively push the envelope in questioning the dominant paradigm of individualism, privatized ownership and increasing commodification which will foster the co-creation of new solution-oriented work focused on reclaiming and co-create a body of solution oriented work aimed at reclaiming the public domain, shared resources and our own humanity. Here are a few examples of On the Commons' recent initiatives.

Keeping the Lakes Great

On the Commons is working with a collaborative alliance that links environmental activists, Indigenous Nations, inner city grass-

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neys, and others to declare the Great Lakes a commons, public trust and protected bioregion. A central piece of our strategy is the creation of a Great Lakes Commons Charter, a tool to give people and the lake standing and challenge market-dominated governance. The initiative seeks to redefine the process and criteria for decision-making around water use in the region. The process to create the Charter will involve

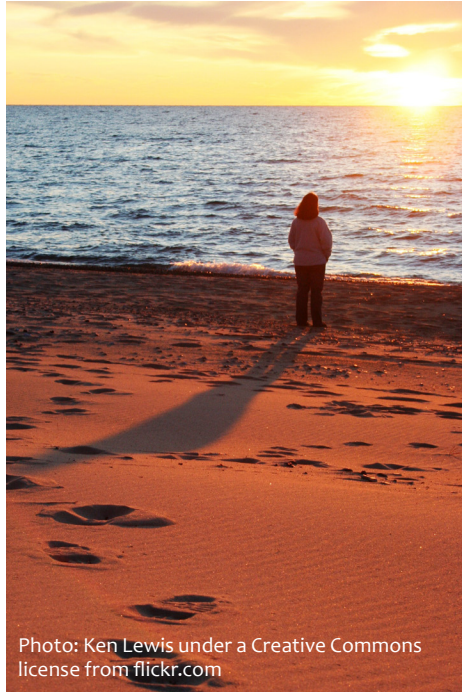


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many citizens and communities and eventually be ratified at a Great Lakes General Assembly. Key partnerships to inform this process include the Vermont Law School and the Notre Dame Mendoza School of Business.

Last month, OTC joined with others in the Great Lakes Commons Alliance in Detroit, MI, to attend the International Joint Commission (the bi-national body prescribed with overseeing protection of the Great Lakes) and the EPA held a public town hall meeting. Testimony by numerous groups and individuals raised the commons framework as essential to ensuring a healthy, just and sustainable future for Lake communities and the water itself.

Stay tuned. GreatLakesCommons.org will be live soon and list details for our upcoming events all around the lakes!

Commons Convergences

Last year, OTC published the new book *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons* with The New Press, which generated widespread coverage in the media and blogosphere, along with discussions on 30 national and local radio programs.

With the release of this new book, On the Commons undertook a major effort to bring the commons alive with convergences profiling the work of a wide cross-section of grassroots groups. We held public events with enthusiastic crowds in Boston and Cape Cod, MA; San Francisco, CA; Portland, OR; Portland and Belfast, ME; Minneapolis, St. Paul and St. Peter, MN; Calgary, AB; Iowa City and Grinnell, IA; and Boise, ID. We are building on this success in 2012 by planning a set of commons

convergences and interactive workshops in communities and campuses across the country to continue bringing the commons to life and unleashing new leadership. We are kicking off next year's schedule of commons tours with an environmental conference in Hamilton, ON and more college visits.

This fall we keynoted at the 10th annual Great Lakes Bi-onesers gathering in Traverse City, MI. The theme of this year's gathering "Reclaiming our Commons." OTC's Jay Walljasper gave the keynote address and OTC staff Alexa Bradley led the keynote workshop at the gathering, which was attended by 800 residents from the Great Lakes region. ([See the keynote address.](#))

Word Gets Around

To advance the commons, OTC publishes www.OnTheCommons.org, which has seen its traffic double in the last year. Our website editor Jay Walljasper has published essays examining the potential of the commons to drive social change in *Yes!* magazine, *The Nation*, Huffington Post, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Commons Dreams*, *Alternet*, and the book *The Rights of Mother Nature*.

First-Ever “Festival of the Commons” Celebrates All We Share

Featuring Nobel Laureate for Economics and Commons Hero Elinor Ostrom

Elinor Ostrom—the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for Economics—joined us for Festival of the Commons, held October 7-8 co-hosted by On the Commons and Augsburg College’s Sabo Center for Citizenship and Learning. The event celebrated our commons, everything we all share from water and wilderness to the Internet and accumulated human knowledge.

Professor Ostrom was the keynote speaker and held several master classes for students interested in the commons. This professor of political science at Indiana University won the 2009 Nobel for research that demonstrates the worldwide importance of the commons. The concept of the commons is founded upon principles including collaborative and participatory governance, responsibility to prevent harm and repair damage, creation of a sense of shared ownership and belonging, enhanced relationships built upon deep connections to one another and the earth, and stewardship that creates sustainability for coming generations. She found that—counter to conventional wisdom—people could collaborate to use and manage natural resources, intellectual property, and other shared resources. Her work runs counter to current ideas about common property management, regulation, and privatization.

Following Ostrom’s talk, the crowd flowed into a nearby city park to celebrate the commons of music, cuisine, theater,



community organizations and social interaction. The next day featured a commons walking tour of Minneapolis led by Sabo Center Chair Garry Hesser, and a bike tour by Jay Walljasper, author of *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons*, and Augsburg urban sociology professor Lars Christiansen.

On the Commons will seek counsel from Dr. Ostrom as we develop our Great Lake Commons Initiative – a multi-national, multi-dimensional proposal based around Ostrom and others’ research about commons-based management and stewardship of common pool resources.

Dear Fellow Commoners: We Need Your Help

We want to take moment to thank you for all that you have contributed to [On the Commons](https://onthecommons.org). Whether you are a long-time supporter, or are just getting to know us, **you make our work possible.**

The demand for our work is growing exponentially. The times are challenging for many reasons and it feels more difficult to bridge the widening canyon of polarization, powerlessness and anger. The commons is an antidote and framework allowing us to re-enliven authentic community, a sense of belonging and our rightful role as citizens in determining decisions that affect us. We need your help to deepen our impact and to advance the commons movement.

Now is the time to expand your support of On the Commons. **Please consider making a tax-deductible gift today at onthecommons.org/donate.**

This is the commons moment. Together we can enliven the commons vision to shape a just and hopeful future for our communities and planet.

With hope and gratitude,

*Julie, Ana, Faye, Alexa, Jay, Albert and Jessica
for the On the Commons network*

OTC'S COMMONS SOLUTIONS

We continually see how skills for holding the common good together and creating solutions that benefit all has been weakened in our market-based society. How do we share power, how do we create the conditions for average citizens to create solutions beyond bureaucratic processes that only require input and feedback? How do we actually DO the work that is necessary to inspire an equitable sharing of resources that we pass on to the next generation?

OTC incubates commons-based solutions that demonstrate new ways of living and meeting our needs. Here is some of our recent solutions-focused work. (And let us know about your own commons work!)

Land, Food, Money: The Commons Connection

On the Commons is exploring the question of what could commons-based investment in farmland and local food enterprise look like. Weaving direct, mutually supportive relationships among farmers, households, and businesses by transforming our thinking about security, money, investing and our connection to land and food is our focus during this project.

We are partnering with co-ops, community banks, investors, organizations and regular commoners to imagine and pilot new (as well as build on values-aligned existing) investment mechanisms to deepen our relationship and connection to local food sources and increase the flow of currency and connections for our food system. We are also thinking about farmland and the larger question of what is security – and

how can we have security when land ownership is concentrating into the hands of a few? On the Commons convened a national gathering of farmers, investors and sustainable agriculture and land trust leaders for a conversation fostering new ideas, tools, strategies and partnerships to convert more land to ecological forms of production, increase farmer access to the land, and transform our thinking about the nature of land ownership. We are now looking at how to create new methods for community members to financially invest in a local and sustainable food economy as an alternative to a traditional IRA. Such a model could not only provide food security to a growing body of people but also stop the corporate land grab underway across the country.

Social Charter

OTC is creating The Great Lakes Social Charter to fundamentally change the process and metrics for decisionmaking about the Great Lakes. A social charter is a formal declaration that outlines the rights and incentives of a community – involving both local jurisdictions and the multi-

jurisdictional environment – in the supervision and protection of a common resource. This is a new approach, which we believe is needed over the long term to maintain the health of the Great Lakes treasure and re-engage citizens in protecting this commons world treasure.

Commons Framework

Commons-based solutions are often co-created with the help of commons animators – leaders who breathe new life into situations, question dominant paradigms, and fosters collaborative approaches. Commons Animators use the commons framework to pose fundamentally different questions that can help to redefine problems and generate groundbreaking solutions that are commons-based.

The commons, as both an approach to the stewardship of shared resources and a related narrative, offers citizens much needed pathways to achieve power and create solutions that benefit all. A commons approach places a high value on what we share, and emphasizes forms of “citizen engagement” that enable people to become stewards and protectors of resources-- not just users. This provides the basis to re-invigorate democracy, re-enliven authentic community and restore the spirit of collaboration that empowers us to claim the right to make decisions that affect our lives and futures.

Homegrown Commons

On the Commons co-director Julie Ristau co-chaired Homegrown Minneapolis, a local food program launched by the City of Minneapolis. In this role, she partnered with the city to create authentic partnerships with citizens and community groups. This innovative process drew on a commons framework to distill the principles often identified by the community in this process – equity, collaboration, relationships with each other and our food, celebration, cultural distinctiveness, sufficiency, local, and empowerment. The commons framework, along with the kindred frameworks of resiliency and permaculture were also used by Ristau and the Homegrown Minneapolis Implementation Task Force to innovate a new vision and operating guidelines for the newly created Minneapolis Food Council.

This initiative began by researching existing Food Policy Councils across the US. Several reports have pointed out that Food Policy Councils can become bureaucratic, quasi-governmental entities that can dwindle in excitement and momentum.

Representative-based membership can diminish efforts for cross-collaboration and stewardship of the whole system. Meetings often held in downtown locations during daytime hours limits participation. An exclusive focus on policy fails to engage the hearts and minds of the community members who have been growing and creating local food and local economies.

[The Homegrown Minneapolis Blueprint](#) describes the approach and thinking involved in creating the Minneapolis Food Council as a commons-based structure. Based on the information and insights gathered, the Homegrown Minneapolis Food Council uses a hybrid structure: one that is neither fully owned nor independent of the city, and one that is neither held exclusively by nor without the co-equal investment of the community. Rather, the hybrid structure might best be understood as a footbridge connecting the city and the community into their rightful relationship—one of mutual trust, benefit, and shared vision.