This class is aimed at addressing the economics, law, and politics of the common pool (open access). All environmental and most natural resource problems involve some aspects of the “commons.” Resources may be open-access due to endogenous social regimes—costs, benefits, customary practices, etc, or due to particular geo-physical or biological regimes that raise the costs of controlling access. So the class will be about the explaining the causes and consequences of common pool resources and well as the institutional solutions—keeping open access, customs, private rights, group ownership, state ownership, state regulation.

You will obtain a better understanding of the “Tragedy of the Commons,” how open-access is managed, and why problems of the common pool often are so difficult to solve, despite important economic costs and incentives to resolve them. Management regimes include private ownership, joint ownership, customary control (common property), and administrative agency management. You will examine why and how each of these management arrangements exists and its effectiveness. You will read and discuss the basic theoretical and empirical literature, and prepare short papers summarizing the major arguments in the papers you read. We will not read all of the papers in the syllabus.

You also will write a team research paper. Students will lead discussion of the course material. The research papers will involve some classic commons or open-access cases, including the extinction of the passenger pigeon, the demise of the California sardine fishery, the near extinction of the American buffalo, and the problem of global warming. The project will involve basic research as well as examination of efforts or lack of efforts to sustain the stock.

In the analytical section of the course we will discuss open access, the tragedy of the commons, private property rights, common property rights, complex rights, state regulation, bargaining issues, externalities and social costs.

In the applications section there are many possibilities: land, minerals, water, wildlife, air, oceans, fisheries, spectrum, pests, and intellectual property.

I. Theory and Basic Arguments

A. Externalities

B. The Tragedy of the Commons

C. The Theory of the Commons or Open Access: Over Entry and Use.

D. The Theory of the Commons or Open Access: Under Investment.
D. Solutions: Customs, Common Rights

E. Solutions: Private Property Rights
F. Solutions: Administrative Regulation


II. Applications Areas: Land


III. Application Areas: Mineral Lands


IV. Applications Areas: Oil Pools

V. Applications Areas: The Fishery

VI. Application Areas: Other Wildlife.

VII. Applications Areas: Air Pollution and Global Warming