Introduction

When my seatmate on the airplane turned to me and abruptly asked, "So what do you do?" I replied that I study the commons and work as an activist to try to protect it.

Polite bewilderment. "Say what?" It was not the first time. So I cited the familiar references—the Boston Common and medieval pastures—and moved on to the so-called tragedy of the commons, the meme that brainwashed a generation of undergraduates.

Sensing a quiver of interest, I ventured further, mentioning open-source software, Wikipedia, countless collaborative websites, and billions of books, articles, images, and music made shareable via Creative Commons licenses. At the risk of overwhelming my captive seatmate, I ticked off a list of commons that are rarely seen as commons: community supported agriculture and community land trusts. The "gift economies" of blood donation systems, mutual aid networks, and Indigenous commitment-pooling traditions.

There are fisheries managed by coastal fishers, water protectors defending precious rivers and groundwater, and alternative local currencies. There are makerspaces, mesh network WiFi systems, and platform cooperatives. Language itself is a commons, free to anyone to use, but whose letters and words are fast becoming proprietary trademarks.

I half expected my new friend to turn back to her book or gaze out the window at the fleecy clouds over the Great Plains. Instead she brightened. "Oh, I get it! The commons are things that no one owns and are shared by everyone."

Well put.

She mused that the park where she walks her dog and mingles with strangers is a commons—and so is the online listserv about parenting that she belongs to. She cited a community festival and parade with homemade floats and local luminaries.

In the modern industrialized countries of the world, the commons tends to be a baffling, alien idea. The word may be invoked to make faux-genteel allusions to Merrie Olde England ("Coxswain Commons Apartments"), but otherwise it has scant currency. We don't really have a language for naming commons—*real* commons—and so they tend to be invisible and taken for granted. The commons is not a familiar cultural category. (Confusingly, "commons" is both the singular and plural of the term, and some people make things even more confusing by using the word "common" instead of "commons.")

Anything of value is usually associated with the "free market" or government. The idea that people could actually self-organize durable arrangements for managing their own resources and that this paradigm of social governance could generate immense value, well, it seems either utopian or communistic, or at the very least, impractical. The idea that the commons could be a vehicle for social and political emancipation and societal transformation, as some commons advocates argue, seems just plain ridiculous.

The point of this book is to gently dispel such prejudices and provide a short introduction to the commons. After encountering so much confusion about the commons over the years—and seeing how rich bodies of commons-oriented scholarship are inaccessible to the lay person, and commons-based activism

projects are scattered, ignored, or misunderstood—I decided it was time to write a short, accessible synthesis of the topic.

I want you, my reader, to imagine that you are my quizzical seatmate as we begin a short flight. You have intuitions about the commons and the need for social cooperation. You surely know about the dismal performance of corporate capitalism and government. You may be outraged by the alarming privatization of public lands, schools, and research; Big Tech's relentless surveillance of our personal lives via social media and websites; and investors' destructive addiction to carbon fuels and economic growth. The pervasive commodification and privatization of our shared wealth is what spurred me to write my first book on the commons, *Silent Theft*, in 2002. It helped me realize how our ignorance of the commons is actually part of the problem. It allows grand narratives about economic growth and progress to deflect attention from what's really going on: the private plunder of our common wealth, our dispossession, our social disintegration.

That's why I want to explain the history of the commons and the political vision it sets forth as reasons for optimism. I want to describe how the commons can ameliorate our economic troubles by offering us fairer, more eco-minded ways to meet our needs. Commons help us enact a richer theory of *value* than conventional economics allows us to imagine. This is not just an idle academic exercise but an urgent practical one because too much of the world's economic and political life revolves around voracious markets and the warped human relationships and ecological damage they inflict.

In the following pages, we will see the power of commons to address such problems in innovative, socially minded ways. Simply *talking about commons* is a valuable first step. For starters, it gives us a rich vocabulary to *name* the pathologies of markets and the feasible commons-based alternatives. I like to think that by naming the commons, we can learn how to reclaim it.

We can begin to understand the limits of markets and learn how to participate in *commoning* with others. We can reap many benefits—economic, social, political, civic, physical, aesthetic, even spiritual—that can't be bought at a store.

The 2008 financial meltdown and decades of market/state inaction on climate change make clear that the dogmas of market individualism, private property rights, and unfettered markets cannot, and will not, deliver the kind of change we need. And yet the traditional advocates of reform, liberals and social democrats, while generally concerned with market abuses and government malfeasance, are themselves too timid or exhausted to imagine new paths forward. They are too indentured to the market/state mindset and cultural outlook. (I use the term "market" in this context to refer to large capital-driven markets conjoined to our neoliberal polity: a realm of predatory monopoly, concentrated political power, and exploitation—rentier capitalism—and not Adam Smith's idea of free exchange among equals in transparent, open markets.) By accepting the power of finance capital and corporations, many professed liberals are not really willing to fight for new forms of governance and political transformation. They are content to muddle through with political marketing and buzzwords while clinging to sinecures of privilege.

Countless real-life commons provide a vital counterpoint. By stewarding the gifts of nature and hosting online collaborations and various forms of mutual aid, they enact new configurations of power, governance, and aspiration. They integrate economic production, social cooperation, personal participation, and ethical idealism into a powerful single package of self-help and collective benefit. The commons is essentially a parallel economy and social order that quietly affirms that another world is possible. And more: we can build it ourselves, now.

As we will see in the pages that follow, the commons holds great promise for reinventing dysfunctional governments and

reforming predatory markets. It can help us rein in our overly commercialized consumer culture. It can usher in new forms of green governance to protect the environment. At a time when our representative democracy has become a gaudy charade driven by big money and remote bureaucracies, the commons offers new forms of on-the-ground participation and responsibility that can make a real difference in people's lives.

I should stress that the commons is neither a messaging strategy of the sort favored by campaign publicists, nor an ideology or dogma. It is not just a new name for the "public interest." It amounts to a kind of political philosophy and practical way of being that engages us as complex, embodied, feeling creatures. Commoning invites us to escape the suffocating norms of capitalist culture and explore and develop our authentic inner selves in communities of social trust. This self-transformation is a necessary step for engaging with the more-than-human world and transforming the external world. Indeed, it opens up a new type of politics by identifying the market/state duopoly as a central issue and naming a world that lies beyond it.

The market and state, once very separate realms of morality and politics, are now joined at the hip: a tight alliance with a shared vision of technological progress, corporate dominance, and ever-expanding economic growth and consumption. Commoners realize that this is not just a morally deficient, spiritually unsatisfying vision for humanity; it is a mad utopian fantasy. It is also ecologically unsustainable, a crumbling idol that can no longer command respect.

In response, the commons sets forth a very different vision of human fulfillment and ethics, and invites people to achieve their own bottom-up, do-it-yourself styles of emancipation. It has little interest in hidebound party politics, performative rhetoric, rigid ideologies, or elite, centralized institutions. It seeks to build anew, or, as R. Buckminster Fuller memorably

put it, "to change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

That's what a robust commons movement around the world is doing. The Commonsverse is pioneering new forms of production, more open and accountable forms of governance, innovative technologies and cultures, and healthy, appealing ways to live. It is a quiet revolution—self-organized, diversified, and socially minded. It is pragmatic yet idealistic and, for now, only occasionally engaged in mainstream politics or public policy. Yet it has been steadily growing, in most instances outside the gaze of the mainstream media and political establishment. It seems poised to "go wide," as they say in the movie business, because various tribes of transnational commoners are increasingly making common cause with each other.

I hope that in the coming flight I can explain the refreshingly different logic and social dynamics of commons as they are now unfolding in numerous contexts. I promise to keep things short, accessible, and interesting—while pointing as much as possible to the complexities and unresolved questions that demand further attention. Our journey through the world of the commons will pass through three stages: (1) a survey of enclosures of the commons as a significant problem of our time; (2) a look at commons as generative living systems building a new type of worldview, culture, and political economy; and (3) the challenges facing the Commonsverse in the years ahead.

I hope our flight together goes briskly. I promise you will see a landscape that is not often seen, at least in one sweeping, clear view. Before we conclude, I want to contemplate the future of the commons paradigm as it confronts the aging dogmas of neoliberal ideology. How can we unseat a "free market" creed that cannot deliver on its promises and yet will not allow serious consideration of alternatives? How can commoning advance

when our archaic systems of nation-states, law, bureaucracy, and finance are so entrenched and resistant to change?

The good news is that commoners and kindred system-change advocates are already making impressive progress. These movements—for degrowth, the social solidarity economy, cooperatives, transition towns, agroecology, relocalization, peer production, alternative currencies, racial justice, decolonization, Indigenous cultures, the Wellbeing Economy movement, and many others—are in effect creating a new type of "parallel polis," one that will eventually force a reckoning with the market/state leviathan. This is no ideological pipe dream. It is a piecemeal revolution of real, functional alternatives being built by savvy, pragmatic innovators working largely beyond the gaze of mainstream institutions.

There will surely be some turbulence ahead but also many beautiful, soaring vistas. For now, sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight. Let's talk about the commons.

1

The Rediscovery of the Commons

The women of Erakulapally—a small village two hours west of Hyderabad, India—spread a blanket onto the dusty ground and carefully poured sacks of brightly colored, pungent-smelling seeds into thirty piles: their treasure. For these women—all of them *dalit*, members of the poorest and lowest social caste in India—seeds are not just seeds. They are symbols of their emancipation and the rehabilitation of the local ecosystem. The homegrown seeds have enabled thousands of women in small villages in the Andhra Pradesh region of India to escape their fate as low-paid, bonded laborers and to remake themselves as self-reliant, proud farmers.

In 2010, when I visited Erakulapally under the auspices of the Deccan Development Society, Indian food prices were soaring by 18 percent a year, bringing social unrest and hunger to many parts of the country. But five thousand women and their families in seventy-five Andhra Pradesh villages not only had enough food for their needs—two meals a day instead of one, as previously—they had achieved food security without having to rely upon genetically modified seeds, monoculture crops, pesticides, outside experts, government subsidies, or fickle markets. Their achievement of food sovereignty, as it is called, has been

remarkable because they are outcasts many times over: they are women, socially shunned "untouchables," and poor rural villagers.

During the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, governments and foundations in the West made a big push to introduce large-scale commercial rice and wheat production in so-called developing countries. This helped mitigate hunger in the short term, but it also introduced crops that are alien to many Indian ecosystems and that require harmful and expensive pesticides. The new crops are also more vulnerable to drought and volatile market prices. Tragically, the Green Revolution displaced the traditional millet-based grains that generations of villages had once grown. The expense and unpredictability of market-based monoculture crops—and the agricultural and financial failures that often resulted—are widely blamed for an epidemic of over two hundred thousand farmer suicides over the past two decades.

The women of Erakulapally discovered that traditional crops are far more ecologically suited to the semiarid landscape of Andhra Pradesh and its rain patterns and soil types than proprietary seeds from the West. But to recover the traditional biodiverse ways of farming, the women had to ask their mothers and grandmothers to search for dozens of old, nearly forgotten seeds. Eventually, in attics and family safe boxes, they found enough seeds to do a planting, and finally, after many additional rounds of cultivation, they revived their traditional "mixed crop" agriculture. The practice consists of planting six or seven different seeds in the same field, a practice that acts as a kind of "eco-insurance." No matter if there is too much or too little rain, or if the rain comes too early or too late—*some* of the seeds will grow. Families will have enough to eat no matter the weather—without the huge expenses and ecological harm of industrial agriculture.

The recovery of traditional agriculture did not come through technology transfer or government-sponsored agricultural

research. It came through a do-it-yourself process of recovering the people's knowledge and deliberately encouraging social collaboration and seed sharing. In seed-sharing villages, every farmer now has a complete knowledge of all the seeds used, and every household has its own "gene bank," or collection of seeds, safely stored at home.

"Our seeds, our knowledge" is how the women put it: every seed is a capsule of their knowledge. No one is allowed to buy or sell seeds; they can only be shared, borrowed, or traded. The seeds are not regarded as an economic input. Villagers have a reverential, almost mystical relationship with the seeds, which is a subtle but important reason that the women were able to emancipate themselves. "Every crop has a meaning in a woman's life," said P. V. Satheesh of the Deccan Development Society. "The seeds are a source of dignity."

The seed-sharing commons of Andhra Pradesh illustrate an important feature of commons: they can arise almost anywhere and be highly generative in unlikely circumstances. There is no master inventory of commons. They can arise whenever a community decides it wishes to manage a resource in a collective manner, with a special regard for equitable access, use, and sustainability.

The title of this chapter, "The Rediscovery of the Commons," has a certain ironic edge because for countless societies around the world, commons have never gone away. They have been a part of their daily lives for centuries, nourishing them with food, firewood, irrigation water, fish, wild fruits and berries, wild game, and much else. But these commons, like those of Native Americans' and other Indigenous Peoples', have often been regarded, even today, as invisible or trivial. As most economists will tell you, only markets have the power to meet our essential needs.

The recent "rediscovery" of the commons suggests otherwise. Market-obsessed industrialized societies are coming to realize that the market and the state are not the only ways to organize society or manage resources.

But the path to understanding the commons requires a willingness to think in particulars, see the creative potential of social relationships, and surrender the search for abstract universals and predictable certainties. Commons work because people come to know and experience the management of a resource in its unique aspects. They come to depend on each other and love *this* forest or *that* lake or *that* patch of farmland. The *relationships* between people and their collective wealth *matter*.

History matters, too. The particular historical circumstances, leaders, cultural norms, and other factors at a given moment in time can be critical to the success of a commons. Commons persist and grow because a defined group of people develop their own distinctive social practices and bodies of knowledge. Each commons is special because each has evolved in relationship to a specific type of care-wealth, landscape, local history, and set of traditions.

Consider the improbable circumstances that gave rise to one of the most successful, widely used software programs in history, the commons known as GNU/Linux. Linus Torvalds was a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate in Finland in 1991 when he decided to write his own computer operating system. It was a ridiculously ambitious project because operating systems are horrendously sprawling and complicated things that only large corporations can afford to create and distribute. But Torvalds was fed up with the cost and complexity of Unix, a leading mainframe program, so he set out to build a Unix-like operating system that would work on his personal computer. As luck had it, the internet was just coming into vogue as a popular medium for email and file transfers (the World Wide Web had not yet been invented).

Torvalds released an early version of his program to an online group, and within a few months, hundreds of people had volunteered useful suggestions and bits of code. Within a few years, a collaborative community of several hundred hackers had come together to work on the new program. He called it *Linux*—a wordplay that combined "Unix" with his first name, "Linus." Several years later, when the so-called Linux kernel was combined with a suite of programs known as GNU that had been developed by Richard Stallman, founder of the Free Software Foundation, a complete operating system that could work on personal computers was born: GNU/Linux, often known simply as "Linux."

This was an astonishing and unexpected achievement. It not only demonstrated that amateurs could create a highly complex software program, it also showed that the internet is a highly productive hosting infrastructure for social collaboration. A virtual community of self-selected hackers, with no payroll or corporate structure, had organized themselves into a fiercely creative, innovative, results-driven commons. Remarkably, *it worked*!

The Linux experiment proved to be a foundational model for what is often known as "commons-based peer production," a type of online collaboration that invites huge numbers of people to join forces via open network platforms. The GNU/Linux model of commoning was the social pattern that later inspired collaborative projects like Wikipedia (and hundreds of less renowned wikis) and open-access scholarly journals, in which academic disciplines reclaim control over their work from commercial publishers and make it free and shareable. Linux also inspired such recent innovations as social networking; crowdsourcing of information and fundraising; and open design and manufacturing projects such as the Global Village Construction Set, a collection of fifty types of affordable farm equipment produced using open source principles.

As we will see in Chapter 9, the Linux experiment defied some seemingly inviolate principles of economics. It showed that the interplay of rational, self-interested individuals bargaining in the marketplace is not the only way to create wealth. Indeed, it showed that wealth itself is much more than fabulous sums of stocks, bonds, and cash. Serious wealth can also find expression in a community asset and the rich set of social relationships that make community possible. The Linux story is stunning proof that the commons can be highly generative and contemporary as well as practical and effective.

There is no standard formula or blueprint for creating a commons; that's what examining any particular commons reveals. Nor is the commons some panacea or utopia. Commoners often disagree among themselves. There are personality clashes as well as internal debates about what works best and what's fair. There can be structural governance problems and external political interference. But commoners are intent on addressing difficult practical questions such as, What's the best way to irrigate these forty acres when water is scarce? and What's a fair way to allocate access to a dwindling fishery in this coastal bay? Commoners are also not afraid to tackle the problem of shirkers, vandals, and free riders—individuals who want benefits without corresponding responsibilities.

The point is that the commons is a practical paradigm for self-governance, peer provisioning, and living well. Commoners negotiate satisfactory arrangements to meet their common purposes without getting markets or government bureaucracies involved. They struggle to figure out the best structures for organizing their stewardship of a collective resource, the procedures for making rules and operational norms that work. They understand the need to establish effective practices to prevent

overexploitation of their forest or lake or farmland. They negotiate fair allocations of duties and entitlements. They like to ritualize and internalize their collective habits and stewardship ethic, which over time ripen into a beautiful culture.

A constant challenge is the tendency of some people to defect from a common agreement and undermine potential schemes that would otherwise benefit everyone. This can lead to private profiteering from a collective asset or, worse, a chaotic free-for-all that destroys the resource. Social scientists often call this a "collective action problem." Commoners resolve it by relying on a different mindset. Instead of assuming that we are self-sovereign individuals, commoners see themselves deeply entangled with each other and intraconnected in an existential, biological sense. This echoes the sensibility embodied in many Indigenous cultures. From this perspective, collective action is not necessarily difficult or improbable (as conventional economics presumes) if one approaches would-be commoners as "another version of me" and not as isolated self-interested individuals. We will explore this issue further in Chapter 7.

It helps to understand that commons are not just *things* or *resources*. Outsiders to commons scholarship are prone to this mistake, either because they are economists who tend to objectify everything or because they are declaring a belief that a certain resource *ought to be governed* as a commons (what I call an "aspirational commons"). Commons certainly include physical and intangible resources of all sorts, but they are more accurately seen as social organisms showing great concern for their "care-wealth." In a commons, people's lives and affections are entangled with the "resource," a word that implies a commodity that can be bought and sold at will. A commons combines a distinct community with a set of social practices, values, and norms that are used to steward care-wealth, which in turn creates bonds of shared purpose, social affection, constructive disagreement,

and tradition. Put more simply, a commons is *a community + a defined body of shared wealth + a set of social protocols*. The three are an integrated, interdependent whole.

Seen from this perspective, the question is whether a community is motivated to treat a given chunk of wealth as a commons and to come up with collectively acceptable rules, norms, and enforceable sanctions to make the system work. When put this way, it is interesting to consider the many improbable types of shared wealth that are actually governed as commons.

A clan of muscle-bound surfers on the North Shore of Oahu, Hawaii, share a passion for catching big waves at Banzai Pipeline Beach. The Pipeline has been likened to the Mount Everest of surfing—a place where the best go to prove their mettle and talent. Not surprisingly, there is enormous competition over who is entitled to ride which waves— and resentment against outsiders who don't respect the surfing protocols that the local crowd has developed. "It's a dangerous environment, and without a self-governing control pattern, it would just be chaos out there," Randy Rarick, executive director of the Vans Triple Crown of Surfing competition, told a reporter for the *New York Times*. Another surfer pointed out that "there are serious consequences if you drop in on somebody and they got hurt, or if you wipe out and hurt yourself."

To deal with these issues, a self-organized social collective known as the Wolfpak came together to manage how people may use a beloved but scarce local resource: the massive waves. Wolfpak members have evolved their own rules for the orderly, safe, and fair use of the waves, and for maintaining their own community. They decide who can catch which waves, and they punish those who violate their social code of surfing etiquette. Isaiah Helekunihi Walker, a history professor who has written

about the surfing culture on North Shore, noted, "For the Hawaiians, respect is an important concept, particularly when it comes to being in the ocean." When surfers from Australia and South Africa arrived at the beach, boasting of their prowess, the locals at the Pipeline didn't take it very well.

There have sometimes been conflicts among surfers, especially between locals and outsiders. Which raises an interesting question: Who is the more legitimate steward of the Pipeline, the local surfing fans or the state authorities who have the legal authority to manage the beach? Should the concerns of local surfers be allowed to trump those of outsiders? Whose commons is it, anyway? And what are the fairest, most effective means for protecting it?

The Wolfpak commons resembles certain Boston neighborhoods that have come up with their own rules of managing street parking during the snowy winter months. When Boston is hit with a big snow, it immediately becomes harder to find a place to park your car on the street. This can impose hardships on people who don't live in a detached single-family home with a garage. So in some neighborhoods, residents have developed a shared understanding that if you take the trouble to shovel out several feet of snow to create a parking space for your car, you are entitled to park there until the snow melts. People indicate their right to park in a given space by putting a rusty old folding chair or other battered household item in the empty parking spot.

It is not uncommon for outsiders to the neighborhood to try to remove the folding chairs and try to park there. Or sometimes a neighborhood resident will try to sneak into someone else's spot. This is the classic free rider problem, and it has been known to trigger scuffles and conflicts. Neighborhood residents wish to enforce their informal nonstatutory rules.

Professor Elinor Ostrom once told me that *this* was a commons. I was perplexed. How? Why? She explained that the

neighborhood's self-organized rules for parking during a snow represent "a shared understanding about the allocation of scarce use rights"; in this sense, it is a commons. Like the Wolfpak's allocation of access to big waves, the Boston neighborhoods' "parking commons" are a case of successful self-governance.

But from the perspective of government, neighborhood parking commons are a case of "taking matters into your own hands." Governments tend to be jealous of their authority and hostile to even small incursions on their ability to make and enforce official policy. On the other hand, the lesson from the Wolfpak and the parking commons is that local commons can provide types of management and order that government bureaucracies and formal law cannot. Boston snowplows may not reliably clear the streets of snow, and the city government's enforcement of parking rules may be unreliable or expensive. Hawaiian authorities may not wish to hire a police officer or lifeguard to patrol Banzai Pipeline Beach (leaving a void of governance?), or such tasks may be seen as too impractical or "small" for a large bureaucracy to address.

But the commoners? They often have their own deep stores of knowledge, imagination, resourcefulness, and commitment. Their informal *governance* may in fact outperform official forms of *government*.

In fact, as explicit negotiations among commoners become so engrained that they settle into habit, *custom* becomes a kind of invisible "vernacular law." Vernacular law originates in the informal social zones of society—coffeehouses, schools, the beach, "the street"—and becomes a source of effective order and moral legitimacy in its own right. Social norms such as queuing up in a line (and punishing those who cut in line) and meal etiquette (never take the last helping) are a kind of passive commoning that most of us have internalized as "the way things are done."

They constitute an implicit mode of commoning for managing access to limited resources in friendly, respectful ways.

Each of the commons described above arose spontaneously, without the direction or oversight of centralized institutions or government. Each is committed to a larger collective purpose while also providing personal benefits for individuals. None is driven by a quest for money or personal fortune, at least not directly. In most commons, in fact, the market is a rather peripheral presence. Yet even without the direct involvement of markets or the state, serious production and governance occur.

The beauty of the commons as a "rediscovered" paradigm is both its generality and its particularity. It embodies certain broad principles such as democratic participation, transparency, fairness, and access for personal use, but it also manifests itself in highly idiosyncratic ways. For these reasons, I like to compare the commons to DNA. Scientists will tell you that DNA is ingeniously *under-specified* precisely so that the code of life can adapt to local circumstances. DNA is not fixed and deterministic. It is an adaptable, generative template. It grows and changes. A commons, too, is a living organism that coevolves with its environment and context. It adapts to local contingencies. A forest commons in Vermont is likely to be quite different from one in Nepal or Germany because the local ecosystems, tree species, economies, cultural histories, and much else vary. And yet commons in each of these places are nonetheless commons: stable nonmarket regimes for managing shared resources in fair ways for the benefit of participating commoners. The "diversity within unity" principle that commons embody is what makes the commons paradigm so versatile and powerful—and also so confusing to conventional economists and policymakers.

It's important to realize that, while seed sharing, Linux, and the Wolfpak surfers may seem offbeat examples of commoning, they share many fundamental dynamics. Each is driven by a deep human propensity to cooperate, share, and find collective solutions. We humans have evolved as an adaptive lifeform through our deep symbiotic relations to each other and the natural world. Our identities and cultures reflect this interdependence. The cultures of modern capitalism may regard such behaviors as aberrational, but commoning is in fact a pervasive social phenomenon.

In later chapters, we will get acquainted with many types of commons that enable people to meet their needs in effective, fair, collaborative ways, often grounded in a local or bioregional setting. Agriculture and food are a massive realm of commoning, for example. Tens of millions of Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities live in entangled cocreation with their local landscapes. Their cultures are profoundly integrated with the life of the soil, seeds, plants, water, animals, and the cosmos. In their own ways, modern movements for agroecological farming, permaculture, and Slow Food emulate many of these practices and values. They practice mindful care of the land and make sure that any market activity does not degrade the vitality of living systems. Community land trusts and community supported agriculture (CSA) seek similar goals by ensuring affordable access to the land and equitable sharing of the benefits. Land trusts, for example, decommodify land, protecting it from speculative investment and making it affordable for organic, smallholder farming. CSA farms invite the community to share the upfront risks for planting crops and, in return, share the bounty of annual harvests.

Once you come to see the huge variety of commons in the world, you begin to realize the many valuable functions they serve.

Commons for coastal fisheries and irrigation water have

developed practices to prevent overexploitation of fish and water. Neighborhoods often take care of public spaces and buildings as commons. Urban projects host Web platforms, Wi-Fi systems, and alternative currencies for mutual benefit instead of private profit. Digital networks are a tremendously fertile space for commons-based innovation, as we will see in Chapter 9, as seen in countless shareable software programs, wikis, and infrastructures. Digital commoners are also pioneering new forms of collaborative creativity, governance, and benefit-sharing such as digital autonomous organizations (DAOs) and cosmolocal production. To convey the impressive scope of the Commonsverse, check out my book *The Commoner's Catalog for Changemaking*—a kind of *Whole Earth Catalog* for the world of commoning.

What's critical in creating any commons, as mentioned earlier, is that a community stewards wealth for everyone's benefit, a process known as *commoning*. The great historian of the commons Peter Linebaugh has noted that "there is no commons without commoning." It's an important point to remember because it underscores that the commons is not primarily about resources; it's mostly about the social practices and values. Thinking like a commoner means escaping the economistic mindset and its compulsion to quantify and monetize everything and wrap everything in tight envelopes of private property rights. Commoners are instead focused on developing rich and varied relationships with each other, with their care-wealth and the more-than-human world ("nature"), and with past and future generations.

Commoning acts as a kind of moral, social, and political gyroscope holding these elements together. It provides stability and focus. When people come together, share the same experiences and practices, and accumulate a body of practical knowledge and traditions, a set of productive, self-reinforcing social circuits emerges. They manifest as enduring patterns of

social energy that accomplish serious work and provide ongoing benefit to the community. In this sense, a commons resembles a magnetic field of social, moral, and spiritual forces. The patterns of "commitment pooling" may be invisible to the untrained eye, and its ability to produce economic, biophysical effects may even seem a little bit magical. But it's time to face the reality: Commons are versatile systems for organizing productive, reliable flows of creative social energy.