

A Region Reforming!

The Philosophy, Definition, and Brief History of Ogallala Commons

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I. The Concept

At the dawn of the 21st century (1999), a group of community leaders and regional organizations initiated a resource development network for revitalizing the depleted economies in the High Plains region of the Great Plains, based on the idea of the commons. This region is situated at the center of the U.S., stretching from White River, South Dakota in the north to Midland, Texas in the south. These innovators have begun to see the High Plains region (which cover approximately 174,000 square miles and accounts for about 13% of total U.S. agriculture) not as something that is divided politically into parts of several states, but as a “watershed commonwealth” foreseen by John Wesley Powell.¹ Around the time of his 1876 report to the U.S. Congress, Powell was an advocate of organizing states not along rigid political boundaries, but according to river watersheds. Though he did not speak of groundwater sources, one could argue that Ogallala Commons is a 21st century manifestation of Powell’s unheeded vision...a watershed commonwealth underlying the primary political boundaries of eight adjoining states.

¹ See John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, published in 1878.

Inspired further along these lines of thought by Frank and Deborah Popper's metaphor of the Buffalo Commons², eastern Colorado educator and rancher Vince Shively originated the concept of Ogallala Commons during the mid-1990s. From that inception until his untimely death in 2008, Shively worked with a diverse group of leaders and theorists to shape Ogallala Commons into a prototype for rebuilding resilient communities in the High Plains- Ogallala Aquifer region. In his unpublished concept papers on the subject, he begins by offering a description that succinctly illustrates what Ogallala Commons seeks to address.

"When I was a lad, produce from our farm and the neighbors supplied eighty percent of our diet and the limited cash net income from our marketable products supplied the balance. We pumped water with our windmills and a backup electric-powered pump jack supplied by the 32volt wind generator that also powered our lights, milking machine and other appliances. Eighty percent of our available community cash also recycled within and supported a rich community life. Having returned to the farm after a 40-year urban excursion-odyssey, I find that this same farm and community is twenty percent sustainable and now eighty percent cash dependent on outside inputs including our totally externally grown and processed food supply. As a result of our natural resource drain, low commodity prices and cash drain from high-input costs supplied by the external order, our community is under extreme stress and duress like most other small rural farm communities across the nation. The signs of death are everywhere.

How might we remedy this eighty percent cash drain dependency on the external order which is killing rural American and recreate an eighty percent self-sustainable rural community economy along with a quality social value-based lifestyle again?"

² See Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust," *Planning*, April 1987.

Ogallala Commons is a resource development network that is structurally integrated³ and intentionally guided through a holistic approach. Basically, the theory of holism views reality not as a collection of independent monads or separated parts, but as a web of life, where all creatures and life forms thrive as members of interrelated communities, through holistic patterns of interdependent activity. This does not result in a deterministic collective, but instead, each organism's unique identity and freedom is inextricably tied to the communities that it both draws life from and gives life to.

In terms of economic and social organization, holism moves in the opposite direction of the centralized corporate model that currently holds sway in the U.S. Instead of organizing "from the top down" like the corporate model, a holistic approach turns the pyramid upside down, building reality "from the bottom up" in the form of a holographic hierarchy. Following the example of ecosystems in nature, a holographic hierarchy, according to Shively's rendering of Rupert Sheldrake's theory, "organizes itself from the bottom up by following a very simple repetitive pattern, building strong units that subsequently form higher and higher units of complexity. Interestingly, in nature, higher units of complexity only emerge and are maintained so long as they are able to sustain their health as a unit. The same might be said of human fabrications." Acting as a counterweight to the dominant corporate approach towards economic and

³ For more background into the meaning of structured networks, see a paper by Lynnwood Brown, "Structured Networks: New Prospects for Community and Regional Development" published by Skyloom Developmental Services, Santa Fe, NM (505-474-7289), 1997.

social organization, Ogallala Commons will be structured in a cooperative grassroots pattern.

Why is an understanding of holographic hierarchy so important to understanding Ogallala Commons? The answer lies in our insistence on rebuilding sustainable communities. First and foremost, sustainability means self-sustainability, the ability and capacity of all holistic units or wholes to be mutually self-sustaining in the context of the next larger wholes within which the smaller wholes reside.” This is what Shively refers to as a principle of reciprocity. It also relates to an important principle used in Roman Catholic Social Teaching known as subsidiarity. In short, the principle of subsidiarity holds that decisions should be made by people who are most greatly affected by them, rather than by distant bureaucracies of experts or governments. In addition, intervention by larger social organizations, like governments and transnational corporations, “is justified when it truly provides help (*subsidium*) to the persons and smaller communities which compose society.”⁴ As Shively states, “until this very elemental problem of economic organization is faced head on, there can be no healthy topos or place (self-sustaining communities which maintain their own internal or holistic harmony) upon which the larger wholes are founded. It is

⁴ David Hollenbach, S.J., *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 157. Besides the classic definition of subsidiarity given in Pope Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, another definition framed in more everyday, ordinary language can be found in a recent pastoral letter by the Catholic bishops of Appalachia entitled, *At Home in the Web of Life*. “According to this principle, big organizations should help smaller ones and not undermine them.” (p. 34).

imperative that we get beyond mere talking about sustainability and begin to put into practice the self-sustainability of the local topos/place (small whole or community).”

II. Defining the Commons

This brings us to an important term for our structured network approach that must be defined: commons. Viewed broadly, the commons is the topos or place that defined a node within a network where many levels and types of interactions take place and are integrated. "The commons is the place in which dynamic natural history evolves, diversifies and complexifies, and the base from which cultural history develops in all its intricacy."⁵ Historically, the commons was understood as a place in or near a village that was not privately owned and could be used by all inhabitants, such as a pasture for grazing animals. It was also the place where two rivers or streams converged, and trading centers or villages emerged. In the field of geo-political planning, the term bio-regionalism is increasingly being employed to define the topos/place where key interactions between the natural and social ecology intersect to form the commons or homeland.

On a philosophical level, the commons, as the foundation of community and polity, is a place of interchange, of enrichment. Despite modern historical examples to the contrary, the commons is not primarily an arena for profiteering

⁵ John Hart, "Living Water: A Sacramental Commons" in *Catholic Rural Life*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (2003): 7.

through raw material extraction. It is a living endowment, a commonwealth that humans can use wisely and carefully, but not something we can ultimately own or are free to exhaust. The commons is a place where the entire community of creation is energized, rather than impoverished or exploited. Truly, the commons exist for the common good, providing common goods for the benefit of the world.

The commons thrive where there exists an atmosphere of "common sense" nurtured by education, formation, and beauty...realities that are best sustained by diverse cultures and vibrant arts. When these wellsprings of education and arts are flourishing, there is a firm basis for an economy and an ecology of sustainability. At its most authentic level, the commons appear as an ongoing conversation, and an invitation to conversion. The commons can be neither established nor maintained by special interest groups, but only by "common interest" and its subsequent partners: sacrifice and humility. The primary law of the commons is generativity, not greed, and the fundamental actions in the commons are based on dominion and not domination...on home-building and husbandry that preserve the world of being.

Theological writings and nature literature contribute key concepts and terms for understanding the meaning of the commons. As theologian John Hart points out, the bioregional commons is a place imbued by the presence of God..."a locus of engagement of Creator and creatures where [t]he Spirit cares

for the commons and all in it."⁶ What is noteworthy in Hart's work and other faith perspectives is a recognition of the sacredness or sacramentality of creation, which is at the heart of Ogallala Commons and other bioregional commons like it. In this view, the commons is not simply a favored location for resource extraction or privatization by humans, but rather, the commons is "a shared space which is the source of life-providing commons goods for all creatures."⁷

Nature writer and former rancher William Kittredge, in reflecting on conflicts over use of the Klamath Basin, seeks to refute widely accepted notions of "the tragedy of the commons." Kittredge believes that our 21st century society can evolve beyond negative predictions of common ownership as described by thinkers such as Aristotle, Hobbes and, more recently, Garret Hardin.

"The natural commons still to some degree exists. Clean air over the distance of the Grand Canyon, or the look of clouds on a wintery morning over Mount Shasta, which we do not think of as owned, are also part of our commons. And there's a human-made commons. Both wildlife refuges and courthouses are part of the commons. And our common possessions are not limited to items that are fixed and defined or even always namable. Concern for the dying and the newborn, and joy in someone's ability to make good soup or bread or wine, are all part of our commons."⁸

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid, 7.

⁸ William Kittredge, Madeleine Graham Blake, and Tupper Ansel Blake, *Balancing Water: Restoring the Klamath Basin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 156. Kittredge has a shorter definition of the commons that illustrates its complexity. "The commons is community. Unfortunately, our mistakes, well-meant or actively malicious, our selfishness and our contrariness, our difficulties with governance, are also part of the commons." (160). Edward Barbanell offers another crucial perspective in refuting Hardin's claim. "In fact, Hardin has not described a *property* arrangement at all. He has, rather, described an *open-access* situation, where everyone (in the community) has liberties to use the resource and no one (in the community) has any duties to refrain from using it." See Edward Barbanell,

The language of theology and spirituality is also insightful in evoking the commons, giving it a much-needed ethical context. In early Christianity, St. Gregory of Nazianzen, one of the leading Greek Fathers, preached eloquently regarding to the commons. "To all earth's creatures, God has given the broad earth, the springs, the rivers, the forests. God has given the air to the birds, and the waters to those who live in water. God has given abundantly to all the basic needs of life, not as private possession, not restricted by law, not divided by boundaries, but as common to all, amply and in rich measure."¹⁰

In a more contemporary writing on the commons, theologian John Hart clearly evokes its radical inclusivity. "The commons is shared habitat and shared place for all, and its human inhabitants are responsible for caring about it and for it where they live and work, and when they are engaged with it, intervening in it, or altering it to meet their needs or the needs of other creatures."¹¹

Ultimately, the commons refer to something owned by all, not by one individual or corporation. The commons is a place or a group of realities that belong ultimately to the community of creation, and conversely, the vitality of any foundation of the commons is a community responsibility. The water cycle, soil & mineral cycle, renewable energy, education, health, leisure & recreation,

Common-Property Arrangements and Scarce Resources: Water in the American West (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 113. Also see Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ St. Gregory of Nazianzen, "Oratio 14: De Pauperum Amore" in *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. II (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1976), 96-97. Italics mine.

¹¹ John Hart, "Living Water", 8.

arts & culture, history, a sense of place, wildlife and the natural world, the foodshed, and spirituality...these are twelve essential aspects of the commonwealth that forms the commons of the High Plains-Ogallala Aquifer region. As such, the commons become a prime focus of sustainable social, cultural, and economic development.

A basic tenet held by Ogallala Commons is that there cannot be significant improvement in the overall economic, environmental, and social conditions of the High Plains area that overlies the Ogallala Aquifer without a unified, holistic structure of interlocking production, financing, and educational institutions. Two models that influence Ogallala Commons are the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in the Basque region of Spain⁹, and the Emilia-Romagna Cooperative of the Bologna region in northern Italy. These cooperatives have succeeded, over the long term, in building a regional economic base that is economically viable and self-sustaining. Both models are accomplished in retaining wealth that is generated locally from natural and human resources in the community, for the benefit of those communities. It must be stated that Ogallala Commons, from its inception, is imbued with the cooperative spirit, such as that demonstrated by

⁹ To learn about the Mondragon model, please refer to the book by Greg McCloud, *From Mondragon to America: Experiments in Community Economic Development* (Sydney, Nova Scotia: UCCB Press, 1997).

one of its key partner organizations, the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union. We believe that the cooperative approach is inherently holistic, and is essential for addressing three key components of our resource network: educational outreach, institutional infrastructure building, and developing enterprise opportunities that truly enrich the commonwealth of the Ogallala Aquifer region.

In summary, Ogallala Commons intends to foster a holistic approach to community socio-economic development in the Great Plains region that is centered over the High Plains-Ogallala Aquifer. To accomplish its mission, Ogallala Commons employs a four-part methodology. First, Ogallala Commons works to weave together and organize a collaborative resource network that focuses on the Great Plains region. This network, woven between renewal organizations, as well as among individual innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, will promote widespread ownership and participation in local communities. Second, Ogallala Commons works to build an educational outreach...a framework for ideas and knowledge templates, in the form of conferences and seminars that ask key questions, offer practical knowledge and resources, and address structural revitalization needs in the High Plains area. Third, Ogallala Commons strives to foster a sense of place in the High Plains, based on the promotion and celebration of community arts, regional cultures, and local histories. Fourth, Ogallala Commons provides leadership to re-vitalize resilient communities across the Great Plains region by reinvesting in the 12 aspects of commonwealth...the source of sustainable wealth generated from the resource base rather than rigid dependence on governmental or multinational

sources. We believe our four-part methodology is fundamental for restoring health and wealth at the grassroots level, and for engaging and supporting local people in the processes of community re-visioning and redevelopment.

In addition, we believe our four-part methodology will weave together with programs being carried out by already-existing renewal organizations. These renewal organizations include the anchor organizations of Ogallala Commons: the Center for Rural Affairs, Savory Center for Holistic Management, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, and the Resource Conservation & Development Districts (RC&Ds) spread across the High Plains states. Through Ogallala Commons, these organizations can collaborate more closely to provide information and technical expertise for improving the social, environmental, and economic conditions of the depopulated and economically depressed High Plains region. By acting together, these organizations can help to produce the synergy for a region-wide, supportive and nurturing developmental framework known as Ogallala Commons. In other words, Ogallala Commons understands that there is no real wealth without long-term health in both natural and social ecologies, in both the land and society. We want to create a holistic resource network capable of healing both natural and social communities, of empowering our region to generate wealth that is sustainable and transformative.

III. Brief History

In April 1999, a small group of organization leaders and agency personnel were invited by Vince Shively to gather in the community of Holyoke, Colorado,

to deliberate on whether there might be anything left that could be done to salvage a piece of the disappearing rural America. Representatives of four organizations present at this meeting: the Center for Rural Affairs (Lyons, Nebraska), Holistic Management International (Albuquerque, New Mexico), the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union-Cooperative Development Center (Denver, Colorado), and representatives from the USDA Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) districts.¹⁰ During the final hour of deliberations, the four organizations established a new entity called Ogallala Commons, a structured resource network to serve as midwife for the rebirth and revitalization of agriculture and communities in the High Plains region which produces about thirteen percent of total U.S. agricultural production. The new entity was envisioned with a top priority of building self-sustaining rural communities based on regional solidarity and sufficiency within the High Plains-Ogallala Aquifer region.

An inaugural meeting, organized by Bob Mailander and Vince Shively, was held in October 2000, to explore begin fleshing out some broad outlines concerning Ogallala Commons. The meeting took place in a conference room at the Airport Radisson Hotel in Denver, Colorado and attended by more than 40 representatives of organizations either residing in the area or working on sustainable initiatives. A year later, a second meeting on the Ogallala Commons project was again held in Denver, Colorado at the Red Lion Hotel on November

¹⁰ These locally-controlled districts are organized and federally funded under the auspices of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The districts exist to support economic, cultural, and tourism development.

15, 2001. Fr. Greg McCleod was a featured speaker at the meeting, and he and other presenters helped to introduce a wider group of leaders to the Ogallala Commons concept and to formalize its inception.

In June 2002, under the mentorship of Dr. Greg MacLeod, a leadership delegation representing Ogallala Commons (Bob Mailander and Vince Shively) attended an international conference conducted by the Tompkins Institute for the New Economy, at the University of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. An objective at this conference was to forge a stronger mentor relationship between the Mondragon Cooperative Cooperation in Spain, and new developmental commons structures in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. During the same summer, the delegation from Ogallala Commons visited the Mondragon and Valencia regions in Spain, as well as the Bologna region in northern Italy, where the Emilia Romagna Cooperative has been successful.

In September 2002, an Ogallala Commons planning committee consisting of Bob Mailander, Vince Shively, Lynnwood Brown, and Darryl Birkenfeld, met in Clayton, NM, to plan a fall meeting of Ogallala Commons. As a follow-up to the planning session, Lynnwood Brown initiated an interactive Twiki site for electronic communication and information about Ogallala Commons. "Collaborative Convergence: A Gathering of Ogallala Commons," was held in Burlington, CO at the Burlington Country Club on November 11-12, 2002, and brought together more than 60 community leaders from across the Ogallala Aquifer region. In addition to hearing keynote presentations by leaders in the cooperative

movement, the group formulated a holistic goal for Ogallala Commons and identified possible projects for the coming years.

In the final day of the meeting, several participants volunteered to form the first Steering Committee for Ogallala Commons. Darryl Birkenfeld agreed to serve as coordinator of Ogallala Commons. In December 2002, Bob Mailander, director of the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union-Cooperative Development Center, under whose auspices Ogallala Commons operates, met in Denver with Darryl Birkenfeld to formalize a memorandum of agreement and work schedule with five objectives for Ogallala Commons in 2003.

The first meeting of Ogallala Commons Steering Committee took place on February 9, 2003 in Nazareth, Texas, following the 14th Annual Southern Plains Conference on "Renegotiating the Grass Economy." On October 9, 2003, the Steering Committee had grown to 14 members when it convened for its second meeting at Eagle Viewing Lodge near Ogallala, NE. This group is the first and most important level of collaboration for Ogallala Commons, and serves as the node for additional networking and partnership brokering.