

STS 036 “Industrial Landscapes”
MIT Fall 2004
Essay #2
Due 9 Nov

In 1968, biologist Garrett Hardin wrote an essay entitled “The Tragedy of the Commons,” in which he described the problems that arise when people compete over natural resources. For instance, when a group of farmers all graze their cattle in a bounded meadow, or “commons,” they will be able to continue doing this only insofar as they are careful to restrict their cattle to a modest and agreed upon amount of grass. If they are not careful, or if some farmers are more inspired by short-term gain, and try to graze more cattle than the land can sustain, then everyone will likely lose the resource entirely.

There are many kinds of “commons” in America – “wild land,” farm land, rivers and lakes, deserts, cities, woods, highways, and so forth. In your essay, think about the commons we have read about and discussed, and address the question: has the sustainability of the commons required an authoritarian state presence in the past? In other words, sometimes the commons has been destroyed, sometimes it has been maintained, but has it been necessary to exert state, rather than individual, control to keep the commons in a functional condition? Why or why not? How have state efforts differed from or been similar to individual efforts? How has technology played a part in this? What factors seem to have mattered most in “conserving” the commons? What least?

You **MUST** use specific examples from class materials to support your response; this essay is meant to explore your grasp of and ability to synthesize materials we have used in class.