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Review: Sustaining the Commons (Arizona State University)

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Review of *Sustaining the Commons*

<https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/sustaining-the-commons>

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Language: English



Reviewed by Chelsie Romulo, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies, University of Northern Colorado on 12/14/19

Comprehensiveness rating: 4 see less

This text presents the research established by Elinor Ostrom on collaborative governance of natural resources with a focus on institutions, rules, and norms from a systems perspective. It serves as a good introduction into the concepts with a very thorough review of the theoretical background. Only one module is called theoretical background, but the other modules are also very theory heavy (especially human behavior and game theory), and it's very nice to see all of this information located in one text - traditionally these concepts would be found across policy, governance, and economics papers or textbooks. This book provides an excellent introduction into systems thinking for natural resource management and provides a learner with important vocabulary and tools for assessing institutions and actions involved. This is also a very important contribution to resource management curricula because other texts on the subject, such as Ostrom's *Governing the Commons*, were not written or designed for an introductory undergraduate course.

While thorough in terms of an introduction to governance in particular, the text will need to be supplemented for both ecological concept topics and applicable or assessment of natural resource management with these principles. The chapter index is very useful, especially in the pdf version because it is interactive, but a glossary would improve comprehensiveness and accessibility.

Content Accuracy rating: 5

One important aspect of this work is that it presents not only work by Ostrom and her colleagues and cohort, but other scholars on the subject, giving a more comprehensive and accurate presentation of our knowledge on the subject. This integration of other scholarship puts this text above others currently available on the subject, which had necessitated the use of quite a few other articles as supplemental readings for class.

Relevance/Longevity rating: 5

This text is very pertinent to current natural resource management issues, especially since one of the two case studies sections focuses on water and water infrastructure. The text contains

modern examples that are unlikely to become irrelevant in the future (such as dams, domesticated animals, forests, etc) and critical modern concepts in our changing world, such as resilience and polycentric governance. There are many programs moving to a systems thinking framework (per recent research by National Council for Science and the Environment) and there are not as many texts available for environmental topics, so this text is a very important contribution to current, relevant topics.

Clarity rating: 4

The book is written in a very accessible grammar and is also available in Spanish, which I noted for our ESL students in class. I think as our LatinX population grows at the university level in the USA this will especially be important for accessibility for students. The book uses very accessible language. In some cases the book can get jargony (for example, in a section called "A Typology of Goods" the text does not explain typology") and while it does a good job of explaining and describing terms generally, there may be some supplemental instruction needed for students.

Consistency rating: 5

Terms used consistently throughout. Only recommendation is to have students practice using the terms and concepts with lots of low stakes assignments and check-in (perhaps muddiest point activity?) because there are many terms that most students have not encountered in this way previously and with how the information builds upon itself, a misconception early on can really throw off a student. One improvement could be the addition of lines such as "In chapter X we described TERM, which is ____" as reminders to students. I may assign them the task of creating and maintaining a word bank that I can check to make sure they understand the terms and concepts.

Modularity rating: 5

The textbook lends itself well to teaching modules both in the content and organization within chapters. The book is set up as 5 modules, though I did not follow these for the course that I teach because some content is covered in other courses on governance and economics. I especially appreciate the preparation in chapters 2 and 3 for terms and concepts the use of case studies in the second module to practice the use of those terms and concepts. It is very easy to divide the book into modules or weekly readings, and I used weekly reading quizzes that the students have said were good for motivating and focusing their engagement every week.

At the end of each chapter is also a "critical reflection" summary and "make yourself think" questions. The questions are not very good for deep, critical thinking (tend to be descriptive), but are a good starting point for students to prepare for more in dept reflections or in-class discussion.

Organization/Structure/Flow rating: 4

The text has good overall organization, but I think that an earlier introduction to the design principles may help students situate the information in context. The first chapter presenting the theoretical background is a good start to why this is an important aspect of governance to

study, but chapters 2-3 are definition and concept heavy. The design principles don't appear until Chapter 7 and I think the next time I teach this course I might move that chapter earlier or perhaps assign an additional reading to cover this concept of design principles before launching into the theory behind institutions and case studies.

Interface rating: 5

The interface is very nice and simple with good use of figures, images, and I like the key concepts (read: learning outcomes) that precede each chapter.

Grammatical Errors rating: 5

No grammatical errors to note.

Cultural Relevance rating: 5

Part of the essence of common pool resources is honoring the established common management of natural resources by indigenous and local peoples around the world. The text presents important cultural context, such as the disenfranchisement of indigenous people by colonial protected area designation, and also presents examples and case studies drawn from diverse backgrounds around the world.

Comments

I used this book for the first time this past semester, Fall 2019. It worked very well for an introductory, sophomore level course on conservation and resource management. We have separate courses on governance, economics, and conservation biology that are very complimentary and I was looking for something focused on common pool resources using a systems thinking framework. I used this in conjunction with some chapters from Conservation Biology for All by Sodhi and Ehrlich (also open source), which worked well to provide some background for those students with less exposure to ecological principles.