A TRAGEDY OF COMMONS

This is a term which was introduced by a genetically trained biologist, Garrett Hardin in 1968 in the development of his well reasoned argument for population control - not by choice or appealing to conscience but by coercion. He was actually quoting from a pamphlet written in 1833 by a much lesser known writer named William Foster Lloyd. Lloyd, an amateur mathematician, used the example of over populated common grazing land to point out that each rational herdsman will continue to increase the size of his herd as he believes he will receive virtually all the products and proceeds from each additional animal. There may be a slight or subconscious recognition that there will be a risk of some possible effect of over grazing if lack of rain or disease brings added stresses on his herd but these effects will be shared by all the other herdsmen. Expressing this mathematically, the negative utility for any particular decision making herdsmen is only a fraction of -1 whereas the positive utility is something very close to +1. He may even reason that the larger the number of animals grazing on the commons the smaller becomes the fraction of the negative utility as this is a function of the additional overgrazing created by his one additional animal.

This of course is not the way a traditional pastoralists would express his thinking but many hours of listening to their public debate and private discussions who that they are fully aware of the problem with some interesting additional insights. The following are some verbatim examples.

"The grass is always stronger than we are. When the rains fail many animals will die but when the rains return the grass will come back even stronger than ever. There will be fewer animals to eat it so for those people and animals who survive the drought there will be good years. -- The herds will be replenished quickly and the weakest animals and people will be gone. -- It has always been that way, people and herds increasing slowly at first, them faster and faster until the grass runs out again. " -- The weakest the laziest, the unluckiest will drop out . Those who survive will soon be strong again. It all depends on the grass.

The difference between this view of population control and Hardin's "worst case scenario" is subtly different. He speaks of a world governed solely by the principle of "dog eat dog" where the number of children a family had would not be a matter of public concern. Parents who bred too exuberantly would leave fewer descendants, not more, because they would be unable to care adequately for their children".

In the stated views of a group of senior, drought hardened, pastoralists they acknowledged the same "inevitability of destiny" which hardin describes as the "Tragedy of the Commons". They appear to accept or even welcome it as being the best way to allow the good herd owners to survive whilst eliminating the least competent the laziest, and those un willing or unable to take the decision of risk. They even use expressions which sound remarkably like the philosophy of Whitehead from whom Hardin "borrows" the use of the word Tragedy. "The essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness. it resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things." They recognise that the grazing resources are finite and limited and believe that only a limited number of their children will be able to follow the pastoral life style. Some were able to say how they chose which sons would be staying with the herds, and what plans they had for the other children. In a society which knows nothing of family planning it was surprising to find that their career planning usually allowed for no more than 2 who would be expected to stay as herdsmen whilst alternative options were discussed for the others, both male and female at a very early age. These plans are not just an arbitrary affair but involved serious evaluation of all the options for alternative employment with a view to maximizing the possible income and influence generation for the family and the wider community.