



Garrett James Hardin (April 21, 1915 – September 14, 2003) was an American ecologist who warned of the dangers of overpopulation and whose concept of the *tragedy of the commons* brought attention to "the damage that innocent actions by individuals can inflict on the environment".

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He was most well known for his elaboration of this theme in his 1968 paper, [*The Tragedy of the Commons*](#)

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He is also known for Hardin's First Law of Ecology, which states "You cannot do only one thing", and used the familiar phrase

["Nice guys finish last"](#)

to sum up the "

[selfish gene](#)

" concept of life and evolution.

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Biography

Hardin received a B.S. in zoology from the University of Chicago in 1936 and a PhD in microbiology from Stanford University in 1941. Moving to the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1946, he served there as Professor of Human Ecology from 1963 until his (nominal) retirement in 1978. He was among the first members of the [Society for General Systems Research](#)

A major focus of his career, and one to which he returned repeatedly, was the issue of [human overpopulation](#). This led to writings on controversial subjects such as abortion, which earned him criticism from the [political right](#), and [immigration](#) and [sociobiology](#), which earned him criticism from the [political left](#). In his essays he also tackled subjects such as conservation and [creationism](#).

In 1974, he published the article "Living on a Lifeboat" in [BioScience](#) magazine, arguing that contributing food to help the Ethiopian famine would add to overpopulation, which he considered the root of Ethiopia's problems. Despite his lifelong insistence that population must be curbed to avoid disaster, Hardin himself had four children.

In 1993, Hardin published *Living Within Limits*, which he described at the time as a summation of all his previous works. In this book he argues that natural sciences are grounded in the concept of limits (such as the speed of light), while social sciences such as economics are grounded in concepts that have no limits (such as "infinite-Earth" economic models). He notes that most of the more notable scientific (as opposed to political) arguments concerning environmental economics are between natural scientists, such as

[Paul Erlich](#)

, and economists, such as

[Julian Simon](#)

. Hardin goes on to label those who reflexively argue for growth as "growthmaniacs",

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and argues against the institutional faith in

[exponential growth](#)

on a finite planet, illustrating this with the example of

[compound interest](#)

, or "

[usury](#)

". This, he claims, must eventually fail, and he argues that society has been duped into confusing interest with debt.

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Hardin writes, "At this late date millions of people believe in the fertility of money with an ardor seldom accorded to traditional religious doctrines".

In 1994, he was one of 52 signatories on "[Mainstream Science on Intelligence](#) , [6]" an editorial written by

[Linda Gottfredson](#)

and published in the

Wall Street Journal

, which declared the consensus of the signing scholars on issues related to

[race and intelligence](#)

following the publication of the book

[The Bell Curve](#)

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Hardin's last book *The Ostrich Factor: Our Population Myopia* (1999), a warning about the threat of overpopulation to the Earth's sustainable economic future, called for coercive constraints on "unqualified reproductive rights" and argued that [affirmative action](#) is a form of racism.

Hardin, who suffered from a heart disorder, and his wife Jane, who suffered from [Lou Gehrig's disease](#), were members of [End-of-Life Choices](#), formerly known as the Hemlock Society, and believed in individuals choosing their own time to die. They committed suicide in their [Santa Barbara](#) home in September 2003, shortly after their 62nd wedding anniversary. He was 88 and she was 81.
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Publications

Books

- 1965, *Nature and Man's Fate* New American Library. [ISBN 0-451-61170-5](#)
- 1972, *Exploring new ethics for survival: the voyage of the spaceship Beagle* Viking Press. [ISBN 0-670-30268-6](#)
- 1973, *Stalking the Wild Taboo* W. Kaufmann. [ISBN 0-913232-03-3](#)
- 1977, *The Limits of Altruism: an Ecologist's view of Survival* Indiana University Press. [ISBN 0-253-33435-7](#)
- 1980, *Promethean Ethics: Living With Death, Competition, and Triage* University of Washington Press. [ISBN 0-295-95717-4](#)
- 1982, *Naked Emperors: Essays of a Taboo-Stalker* William Kaufmann, Inc. [ISBN 0-86576-032-2](#)
- 1985, *Filters Against Folly, How to Survive despite Economists, Ecologists, and the Merely Eloquent* Viking Penguin. [ISBN 0-670-80410-X](#)
- 1993, *Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos* Oxford University Press. [ISBN](#)

[0-19-509385-2](#)

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- 1991. Paramount positions in ecological economics. In [Costanza, R.](#) (editor) *Ecological Economics: The Science and Management of Sustainability*, New York: Columbia University Press. ISBN 0-231-07562-6

- 1991. In: R. V. Andelson, (editor), *Commons Without Tragedy*, London : Shephard-Walwyn, pp. 162–185. ISBN 0-389-20958-9 (U.S.)

Awards

Hardin's 1993 book *Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos*, received the 1993 Award in Science from the

[Phi Beta Kappa Society](#)

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See also

- [Bioethics](#)
- Commonize costs-privatize profits game
- [Lifeboat ethics](#)
- [Multiculturalism](#)
- [Ratchet effect](#)
- [Taboo](#)
- [Tragedy of the commons](#)

References

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<http://www.ideo.columbia.edu/edu/dees/V1003/lectures/population/Tragedy%20of%20the%20Commons.pdf>

3. [^] [Dawkins, Richard \(1989\). *The Selfish Gene* \(2nd ed.\). Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. pp. 202. ISBN 0-19-286092-5.](#)

4. [^] [\[1\] Stalking the Wild Taboo - Stalkers: Hardin: Book Review:](#)

5. [^] ["Living Within Limits"](#) Faith in mathematically impossible exponential growth. The entire content of Chapter Eight.

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7. [^] [Steepleton, Scott \(19 September 2003\). "Pioneering professor, wife die in apparent double suicide" . *Santa Barbara News-Press*](#)

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9. [^] [Living within Limits: Ecology, Economics and Population Taboos](#) , Review and selected long quotes, paperback.

External links

- [The Garrett Hardin Society](#) - includes interviews with Hardin in text and video format
- [The Tragedy of the Commons](#)
- [Obituary at *American Scientist*](#)
- [Obituary in *The New York Times*](#)
- [Tributes at the Garrett Hardin Society](#)

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