

# Managing the Unmanageable

Michael Thompson  
*The Musgrave Institute, U.K.*

Some (Norman Myers, for instance) argue that we must face up to our responsibilities and manage the globe. Others (Bill McKibben, for instance) see that managerial urge as the root of our troubles. We must pull back from our present controlling position. We must taboo the globe. Still others (David Pearce, for instance) see it all as a free goods problem. People mess up the commons because they don't have to pay to use them. The solution, therefore, is to make them pay for these freebies: commodities the globe. These three positions are at the heart of all environmental and technological controversies. They are incompatible (each one's solution is a large part of the others' problems), there is no chance that any two of them will just go away and leave it all to the third, and science will never be able to tell us which one is right. Look on the bright side: if we can't get rid of all this plurality and contradiction perhaps it's what we need!

More formally, this is an argument for clumsy institutions (the terminology is deliberately counter-instructive: tidy, singular and contradiction-free is bad; messy, plural and contradiction-rich is good). A clumsy institution, in contrast to almost all policy analysis and advice, legitimizes all three definitions of problem and solution and then parcels out social transactions to each position. This parceling out is guided by existing evidence of appropriateness and consent. In Britain, for instance we get cups of coffee through the market, blood transfusions through communitarian giving, passenger safety through seat belt legislation. In the United States it is a little different - blood is sold in market transactions - but that is just a political-cultural difference in the criteria of appropriateness and consent. The point is that no social system has ever achieved viability (vis-à-vis itself and its environment) by putting all its transactions into just one institutional arrangement. "Bleeding Kansas" dispenses with hierarchy and community, the Soviet Union banished the market and grassroots egalitarianism, the Khmer Rouge eliminated the market and hierarchy. We should take care not to emulate these different single-mindednesses in our dealings with our enclosed coastal seas.