Prof. Elinor Ostrom experienced firsthand, the value of sustainability at a young age. She grew up in an era of economic depression that led into a resource-consuming war, in a city where fresh water was a prized commodity.

Prof. Ostrom, the Arthur F Bentley Professor of Political Science at Indiana University and cofounder and codirector of Indiana University’s Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, has studied how self-organization and local-level management works to keep common resources, whether natural (e.g., forests) or man-made (e.g., police forces), viable. Combining data from diverse sources ranging from classical techniques such as surveys to modern advances such as satellite imagery, Prof. Ostrom has uncovered numerous principles that govern successful sustainability and that defy conventional beliefs.

Prof. Elinor Ostrom is one of the first social scientists to specifically study the things we share—from oceans and forests to roads and money systems—and breathe fresh life into an old term: the commons.

Prof. Ostrom’s key idea is that neither the state nor the market is the best manager of our collective resources—it’s us, we the people. The commons concept is catching on in a big way as we look at how to lighten our impact on the earth, live within the means of our natural resources, and navigate the ownership issues of a new digital era. Prof. Ostrom’s research is often the foundation for reformers in these areas, which is one reason she was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in economic sciences.