

HOLD IN COMMON | DRUG POLICY WATCH



# Enclosure

# 101

# Introduction: why you keep paying more for things that used to be free

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Your power bill climbs and nobody can say why. A grandfather saved seed every fall; now the fine print says replanting it is illegal. A medicine that costs a few dollars to make is rationed by price. Water that fell from the sky comes back to your kitchen in a plastic bottle at a thousand times the cost.

Most people file these under bad luck, or the cost of living, or just the way things are. This little book is here to tell you they are not separate problems. They are one move, repeated. It has a name. The name is enclosure, and once you can see it, you cannot unsee it.

This is the short, friendly version. No jargon, no homework. By the end you will be able to spot a fence going up in real time, explain it to a friend in one minute, and know what actually stops it.

**How to read this book:** Skip around. Each chapter stands alone. Watch for these little signposts:

- **Remember:** the one thing to keep.
- **Tip:** a handy shortcut.
- **Watch out:** where people get fooled.
- **The bottom line:** the chapter in a sentence.

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## Chapter 1: What is a commons (and why should you care)?

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A commons is simply something we share. Not owned by one person, used by many, and usually kept healthy by some agreed-upon rules. Think of the air, the water in a shared aquifer, the sunlight on your roof, the seeds farmers have traded for ten thousand years, the public roads, and the giant pile of human knowledge that anyone can build on.

A commons is not a free-for-all with no rules. The healthy ones have rules, worked out by the community over a long time. That distinction is going to matter a lot in a minute.

**Remember:** a commons is the part of the world you do not have to be rich or powerful to use.

**The bottom line:** shared things, governed by the people who use them, are the commons. They are worth defending because they are the floor under everyone's feet.

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## **Chapter 2: What is enclosure?**

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Enclosure is taking something shared and turning it into something a few people own. And here is the part everyone misses: it comes in two pieces, always together.

1. **The fence.** The shared thing becomes private property, usually through paperwork, a deed, a patent, a license, a contract.
2. **The flip.** The ordinary thing people always did with it becomes a crime. Saving seed becomes "infringement." Fixing your own tractor becomes "unauthorized." Sharing power off your roof becomes "a violation."

So enclosure is not just a fence. It is a fence plus a new rule that says you are the criminal for doing what you always did.

**Watch out:** enclosure almost never looks like robbery. Nobody rides up on a horse. Somebody files a form. That is exactly why it works.

**The bottom line:** enclosure equals a fence plus the criminalizing of an old, ordinary custom.

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## Chapter 3: The big lie that makes it possible

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You have probably heard the phrase "the tragedy of the commons." The story goes: if everyone shares a pasture, everyone overgrazes it, and it gets destroyed, so the only fix is to carve it up and give everyone a private piece.

It is a tidy story. It is also mostly wrong, and it has done enormous damage.

A scholar named Elinor Ostrom spent her whole career studying real shared resources, alpine pastures, village forests, irrigation systems, fishing grounds, that communities governed successfully for hundreds and even a thousand years. She won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009 for it. Her finding: people are perfectly capable of governing shared things well, with the right rules.

So the real choice is not "private ownership or ruin." The real choice is "community governance or private ownership." The tragedy story hides the third option, on purpose, so that fencing looks like a rescue.

**Remember:** "the tragedy of the commons" is the sales pitch for enclosure, not a law of nature.

**The bottom line:** shared things can be governed well; the doom story exists to make fencing feel like the only answer.

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## Chapter 4: The seven-step recipe (the whole trick on one page)

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Enclosure is not random. It runs the same seven steps almost every time. We call it the enclosure algorithm. Here it is, in order.

1. **TARGET.** Pick something everyone needs and cannot easily do without (water, medicine, energy, seed). Necessities, not luxuries, because people will pay anything rather than go without.
2. **REFRAME.** Change the story. Say the shared thing is unsafe, inefficient, or chaotic, and that a responsible owner will bring order. This is where

you get recruited to cheer for your own fencing.

3. **ABSTRACT.** Turn the living, shared thing into a countable unit you can own. A river becomes a "pumping permit." A plant becomes a "patent claim." Your attention becomes "ad impressions."
4. **TITLE.** Hand that unit to a private owner, with the full force of law. A patent grant. A license. A terms-of-service agreement. Boring paperwork, enormous consequences.
5. **INVERT.** Make the old custom a crime. The farmer who saves seed is now an infringer. This is the hinge of the whole thing. Learn to see this one and you see all of it.
6. **TOLL.** Put a gate between people and the thing they need, and charge them to pass. Sometimes in money. Sometimes, as with rationed insulin, in lives.
7. **NATURALIZE.** Make everyone forget it was ever different. Within one generation, "of course medicine is expensive" and "of course you buy new seed every year" feel like facts of nature.

Then it loops. The money from one fence pays to build the next one. That is why it speeds up.

**Tip:** when you hear "this shared thing is in crisis and only a big trusted company can fix it," you are hearing step 2. Start watching.

**The bottom line:** target, reframe, abstract, title, invert, toll, naturalize, then repeat with the profits.

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## Chapter 5: Spot the fence (the same recipe, in five real cases)

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Once you know the recipe, you see it everywhere. Watch how identical it is.

- **Cattle and meat.** Open markets where many buyers bid for many ranchers' animals got consolidated until four companies controlled most beef processing. Ranchers got less, shoppers paid more, and the gap

went to the middle. Most people now think industrial meat is just how food works.

- **The sun on your roof.** Sunlight is free and falls on everyone. Try to make your own power and share it, and you meet hookup rules, standby charges, and caps. The fuel is free; the bill goes up anyway.
- **Water.** It fell from the sky into a shared aquifer. It gets pumped, bottled, and sold back to you at a markup that can top a thousand times the cost. Two generations ago, buying bottled water would have sounded absurd.
- **Seed.** For twelve thousand years, saving and replanting seed was simply what farming meant. Now replanting a patented seed is infringement, and farmers have been sued for it. Four firms dominate the global seed market.
- **Medicine.** The scientists who discovered insulin sold the patent for one dollar because they believed it belonged to the world. A century later, three companies dominate the US market, the price soared, and people have died rationing it.

Notice the pattern does not care about the product. It only cares that you cannot do without it.

**The bottom line:** different commons, identical recipe. The monotony is the proof.

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## Chapter 6: Why now is different (it is speeding up)

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Fencing the world used to be slow. To enclose a field you had to survey it, walk it, write a deed, pass a law. That slowness was a kind of mercy. It gave people time to notice and push back.

That mercy is gone. On today's frontier, the thing being measured and claimed is a gene, a day of your attention, or the entire body of human writing, and all of that can be measured and assigned to an owner in the time it takes to run a piece of software. The recipe did not change. Its speed did.

This is not a vibe. It is what any self-funding process does: each completed fence pays for the next, so it compounds, like interest. Centuries, then decades, then years, now the runtime of a script.

**The bottom line:** the recipe is old, but it now runs at the speed of software, which is why fences go up faster than we can name them.

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## Chapter 7: The plant that just got a brand new name (a live example)

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Here is one happening right now, so you can watch the recipe in real time.

In June 2026, a company won approval in Europe for a full-spectrum cannabis medicine sold under a trademark. It works; it beat opioids in a trial. After fifty years of stigma, the plant was finally proven legitimate. And then the company stated, for the record, that its evidence cannot be applied to any other cannabis extract, or to the plant itself.

Read that twice. The proof now belongs to one branded product. The same plant, when it grows in the ground, is the cheap and "informal" one. When it carries a trademark, it can cost tens of thousands a year. Nothing about the plant changed. Ownership changed. That is steps four through seven, live.

**Watch out:** the fence often wears a friendly face. Some of the forces driving this are inside the "pro-legalization" tent, large operators and pharmaceutical firms, not just old-fashioned prohibitionists.

**The bottom line:** cannabis is the clearest case unfolding today, which is exactly why it is the door into understanding all the others.

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## Chapter 8: The good news (the recipe runs in reverse)

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If the book stopped here it would just be depressing. It does not stop here, because the most important fact in it is this: enclosure can be undone, and it has been, on purpose, many times. There is a counter-recipe.

1. **Re-narrate.** Tell the true story: shared things can be governed well, and have been. (Thank you, Elinor Ostrom.)
2. **Re-legalize the custom.** Make the old ordinary act legal again, the right to repair, the right to save seed, the right to share your rooftop power.
3. **Title it to the commons on purpose.** Use the same paperwork that fences things, but to lock them open instead. This is how open-source software took over the internet, and how open-source seed protects genetics today.
4. **Remove the toll.** Public options, cooperatives, generic competition, price caps where markets failed.
5. **Remember out loud.** The last step of enclosure is forgetting, so the first step of undoing it is refusing to forget. Say it plainly: medicine was given to the world for a dollar; farmers saved seed for twelve thousand years; water was never something you bought.

And it is not theory. Insulin's price was capped after public pressure. Farmers built cooperatives that still run. Neighbors wired rural America themselves. Eight hundred years ago, the Charter of the Forest wrote commoners' rights into law. People have done this before.

**Remember:** the one weapon that costs nothing and never runs out is memory spoken in public.

**The bottom line:** the fence is only paperwork and forgetting, and both can be answered.

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# The cheat sheet: how to spot a fence in 60 seconds

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Ask these seven questions about anything in your life that quietly got more expensive or more restricted:

1. Is this something people used to share or get cheaply?
2. Is someone telling me it is unsafe or inefficient unless a big company runs it?
3. Has the living thing been turned into a countable, ownable unit?
4. Did a piece of paperwork hand it to a private owner?
5. Has something I always freely did suddenly become "illegal" or "unauthorized"?
6. Am I now paying a toll to reach a thing that used to be within reach?
7. Are we being taught this is just how the world is?

If you answered yes to three or more, you are looking at a fence going up. Name it out loud. That is where stopping it begins.

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## What to do next

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- Learn the pattern and watch it run, with sources, at **[drugpolicywatch.info](http://drugpolicywatch.info)**.
- See the bigger story across water, seed, energy, and medicine at **[holdincommon.org](http://holdincommon.org)**.
- Tell one person. The whole strategy is simple: spread the lens faster than people forget.

The field was here before the fence. It is still here, just under the paperwork, waiting for enough of us to remember it at the same time.

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