

## Wild Food and the Commons

- 1 **Why Wild Food?** Freedom, nor private, communal. Foraging maybe is more than individual survival, survivalism. It's a relationship which doesn't involve money exchange. It's Free. It's a resource held 'in common', it's something as a community of people we have 'in common'. I wondered if there was any more to it, and I found some answers at Bristol Radical History groups' last event 'Down with Fences: Struggle for the Global Commons'. Economists, radical historians and philosophers talked about some key issues. one of which is that whilst the commons are 'Free', they aren't a 'Free for all'. This is important.
- 2 **The Magna Carta.** This was called the Charter of Liberties, sealed in 1215 on a meadow in Runnymede along the river Thames by King John and various barons. It's often remembered as project concerned with protecting the interests of the elite, and certain parts of its sixty four chapters are concerned with protecting the interests of the church, the feudal aristocracy and the merchants. BUT it also had to acknowledge the commoners. It assumed/accepted the commons. So alongside the parts of the charter which were mostly concerned with political and juridical rights there was an accompanying lesser known document called The Forest Charter. This recognised the economic rights of commoners for subsistence in the commons. 'Estovers' is a term in the charter talks about the rights to take timber for repairs, firing and other necessary purposes . Magna carta defined limits to privatisation.
- 3 **Common land has a 'community'** that regulates and negotiates its use, who develop customs to both use the land (estovers) or to prevent it becoming degraded or being used unsustainably (stinting). This is often missing from debates about common land, the idea that if the land isn't owned (has no economic or market value) it will inevitably be degraded, and was used to justify the enclosures both then and now.
- 4 **Enclosures** attacked the commons by fencing off the lands thereby removing the rights of commoners to access resources. Over time it led to migration, the growth of cities, industrial agriculture and the degradation of land and resources.
- 5 **1649** The process of enclosure was accelerating. The Diggers organised against this , and Gerald Winstanley with fourty three other people signed A declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England that resolved to plant the commons withal...seeing the Earth was made for us, as well as for you'. They addressed the lords of the land who do cause the Trees and Woods that grow upon the Commons, which you pretend a Royalty unto, to be cut down and sold; for your own private use, whereby the Common Land, which your own mouth doe say belongs to the poor, is impoverished, and the poor oppressed people robbed of their Rights,...while you, and the rich Freeholders, make the most profit of the Commons, by your overstocking of them with Sheep and Cattle; and the poor...are checked by you, if they cut Wood, Heat, Turf, or Furseys, in places about the Commons , where you disallow.
- 6 **The process of enclosures** continued. It was at first justified economically i.e private land is more profitable and efficient, but it also started to be justified ideologically. In the 1960s Garret Hardin an economist, wrote a text called 'Tragedy of the Commons'. It talked of the environment being destroyed and degraded BECAUSE it was held in common. He talked of the solution to this being to privatise the land and resources, to commodify or give them an economic value, and that way their use will be regulated. This idea led to World Bank and IMF policies of SAP. Crucially though, this text ignored or hid the role of the people who used the land, negotiating and regulating the resources. The forces that sustained the land (people who live one it, their customs and practices) were seen as the problem, , and the very forces that accelerated the degradation of the land (free market, market forces, capital, private profit) were then put forward as a solution.

7 **The Zapatistas** the indigenous people of Mexico issued a communique in 1994 amidst their revolt referring to the Magna Carta. They talked of the wind from above (the rulers) and the wind from below (the forces of the indigenous, the campesinos and the workers). They said the wind from above daily sucks out 92,000 barrels of oil, leaving behind 'ecological destruction, agricultural plunder, hyperinflation, alcoholism, prostitution, and poverty, while the wind from below causes the campesinos in Ocoingo to cut wood to survive. The ejido, or village commons, was destroyed, and its legal protection, Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution repealed.

8 **Hydrocarbon Commons** - George Caffetnzis, US philosopher talks about the 'petroleum commons', how peak oil is about more than just geology, it's also a struggle between enclosure / extraction for private profit, and of communalism as can be seen in Nigeria, Chiapas, the Amazon. In the former struggles have developed - from asking for reparations, clean up and compensations from oil development - into demands for common ownership. In the latter, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, there are proposals to leave the oil in the ground.

9 - The economist Massimo De Angelis talked about '**Commoning**' as a verb, as an action, as a set of values, which can be applied to anything. The Commons as being something more than countryside, or land, there are the 'information commons', 'housing commons', 'public transport commons' all of which are spaces for alternatives to new neoliberal enclosure.

10 **So** after collecting nettles to make beer, propose a toast to the commons, and have a drink for the Magna Carta & the Forest Charter, Liberties and commons for all!