



Elinor Ostrom
1933–2012

Elinor “Lin” Ostrom, nee Awan, was born on 7 August 1933 in Los Angeles, California. She received a B.A. (with honors), in 1954, an M.A. in 1962, and a Ph.D. in 1965, all in Political Science from the University of California at Los Angeles. She married political scientist Vincent Ostrom in 1963, and they moved to Bloomington, Indiana, to join the faculty of the Department of Government at Indiana University in 1965. Dr. Ostrom began her academic career with an appointment as a Visiting Assistant Professor, and the following year received a tenure-track appointment. She and Vincent established the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University in 1973, where she served as Co-Director until 2009. She was appointed as a Full Professor in 1974, Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science in 1991, and Distinguished Professor in 2010. She was a co-founder of the Center for the Study of Institutions, Population, and Environmental Change (CIPEC) in 1996 and served as Co-Director until 2006. She died of pancreatic cancer on 12 June 2012, at the age of 78. She was survived by Vincent, who passed away two weeks later.

Dr. Ostrom’s research examined the use of collective action and cooperation in the management of common pool resources (CPR) by using a comprehensive, institutional analysis approach. Common pool resources that she and colleagues studied include forests, fisheries, grazing lands, and irrigation systems. She carefully analyzed the “tragedy of the commons” concept as initially developed by Garrett

Hardin. Although this concept is intuitively appealing to many, she and her co-workers in numerous, detailed field studies of various natural resource systems found little in support of that concept. Dr. Ostrom¹ identified eight “design principles” of stable local common pool resource management: (1) clearly defined boundaries allowing effective exclusion of external unentitled parties; (2) clearly developed and defined rules regarding the appropriation and provision of common resources that are adapted to local conditions; (3) collective-choice arrangements allowing most parties-at-interest to participate in decision-making processes; (4) effective monitoring of the resources; (5) various sanctions for resource users who violate community rules; (6) effective mechanisms of conflict resolution; (7) self-determination of the community, recognized by higher-level authorities; and (8) in the case of larger common-pool resources, organizations with multiple layers of nested enterprises, with small local CPRs at the base.

Dr. Ostrom had friends and colleagues literally around the world, and she always asked everyone to call her Lin. She always insisted on using an interdisciplinary approach to her research and worked closely in teams with members having different academic backgrounds, such as anthropology, ecology, economics, geography, and political science. She also always insisted on using careful, empirical analysis of both the natural resource itself (e.g., “forest conditions”),² and also of those who used the resource. She was quick to incorporate new analytical approaches and tools, such as complex models, geographic information systems, and remotely sensed imagery into her research. Lin was an outstanding mentor to doctoral students, post-doctoral students and other young scholars. Everyone who worked with her benefited tremendously both from her astonishing intellect and her friendly, positive, unassuming personality. She travelled extensively and often would make a comment to a doctoral student, something like: “I will be in Melbourne next Wednesday and then on to Bangkok, but I will be back in time for your defense.” Serving on doctoral research committees with her was always a delight, because everyone came away from meetings with new knowledge and a wonderful feeling of synthesis and cooperation.

In 2009 Dr. Ostrom was awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, which she shared with Oliver E. Williamson, for “her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons.” She was the first, and to date the only, woman to win the Nobel Prize in this category. Dr. Ostrom was elected as a member of the United States National Academy of Sciences in 1991. She served as president of the American Political Science Association in 1996–1997. In 1999 she became the first woman to receive the prestigious Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science. She was awarded the John J. Carty Award from the National Academy of Sciences in 2004, and received the James Madison Award from the American Political Science Association in 2005. The Ecological Society of America’s Sustainability Science Award was given at the ESA Annual Meeting in Montreal in 2005 to Thomas Dietz, Elinor Ostrom, and Paul Stern for their paper, *The Struggle to Govern the Commons*.³

Other awards and accomplishments are also quite notable. In April 2012, Lin was named to the Time 100, *Time* magazine’s annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. In July 2012, *The Economist* magazine published her obituary. In addition to the awards mentioned above, she has received 32 titles or awards. Dr. Ostrom has had Honorary Doctorates conferred upon her by 12 universities. She has served as Project Director, Principal Investigator, or Co-Principal Investigator for 35 major, externally funded research projects. She has authored or co-authored 30 books, including edited volumes, and 325 articles.

Lin always enjoyed interacting with ecologists and involved one or more ecologists in her CPR projects. A recent article⁴ provides some tangible evidence. She had a high regard for the Ecological Society of America and was a member since 2005.

Footnotes

- 1 Ostrom, Elinor. 1990. *Governing the Commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK. ISBN 0-521-40599-8.
- 2 Moran, Emilio F., and Elinor Ostrom, editors. 1995. *Seeing the forest and the trees: human–environment interactions in forest ecosystems*. MIT Press, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. ISBN 0-262-63312-4.
- 3 Dietz, Thomas, Elinor Ostrom, and Paul Stern. 2003. The struggle to govern the Commons. *Science* 302(5652):1907–1912.
- 4 DeFries, Ruth, Erle Ellis, F. Stuart Chapin, III, Pamela Matson, B. L. Turner II, Arun Agrawal, Paul Crutzen, Chris Field, Peter Gleick, Peter Kareiva, Eric Lambin, Diana Liverman, Elinor Ostrom, Pedro Sanchez, and James Syvitski. 2012. Planetary opportunities: a social contract for global change science to contribute to a sustainable future. *BioScience* 62(6):603–606.