

Daily News Opinion

Commons care can yield resource revolution

I commend the committees in Norway and Sweden who chose President Barack Obama and Dr. Elinor Ostrom as winners of Nobel prizes this month.

Those committee members have lent the prestige of the Nobel name to two very different but very important Americans. Each in his or her own way is helping make the world a better and therefore a safer place.

I don't know if President Obama and Dr. Ostrom have ever met. If not, when they do, Obama can learn how Ostrom's research can help him attain his ambitious goal of finding the keys to a lasting peace, even in parts of the world that seem condemned to a never-ending cycle of exploitation and suffering.

Our president, who is just 48, is determined to reverse the global momentum from war to peace, from cultural animosity to recognition of historical and traditional differences in the spirit of mutual respect.

In just nine months in office, he has reached out to the nations and cultures the U.S., in our recent past, has treated as enemies. He knows something about discrimination, and he is refusing to discriminate against others because of their religious beliefs or because of out-of-date ideologies abandoned years ago.

Ostrom, 76, will receive the Nobel Prize for Economics for her research on the importance of the commons, or common property. Her conclusions are a key to addressing hunger, poverty and the destruction of the environment.

Unknown to most Americans, she is well regarded in the academic world and is admired by a group of Alaskans who have studied her work to learn how to care for and use the lands we own in common.

With keen observation and detailed docu-

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mentation in numerous developing countries, she has proved that tribes and communities can work together to share, benefit from and protect valuable commonly owned lands and resources.

Her Nobel Prize will help others worldwide to understand that to care for this earth, we must address the full environmental equation: people, people's needs and nature.

At age 90, I spend a great deal of time thinking about the commons. It is a foreign concept to most Americans. It isn't taught in our schools. It isn't discussed in Congress. But it is the reality in most parts of the world.

To explain it, I ask, "Who owns the oceans? Who owns the air we breathe? Who owns space?"

The answer is that we all do. And, as owners, it is our obligation to care for the commons and make sure it is used for the benefit of all and not just for one company, one group of insiders or one nation.

As I have traveled the world, too often I have seen poor people living on rich land. If you have visited isolated communities in the Arctic, remote villages in South America, many countries in Asia and nearly anywhere in Africa, you know what I mean. And it is so unnecessary.

I urge President Obama to visit Alaska. If he does, he will see that the resources from the Alaska commons are not being used for the benefit of a select and fortunate few.

When I arrived in Alaska in 1940, this territory was impoverished and exploited. Fortunately, it is a different place today.

The key to our success has been the commons. We won the ownership of 103 million acres from the federal government when we became a state in 1959. That land, and the resources on it, belong to us. The people of Alaska own our commons.

It is up to us to care for our commons and use it for the benefit of our people as advocated by Elinor Ostrom. Indeed, when we elect strong leaders who understand the nature of our unique Owner State and put principle before politics, what we pioneer here can help change the world.

I urge President Obama to visit Alaska. If he does, he will see that the resources from the Alaska commons are not being used for the benefit of a select and fortunate few. Dr. Ostrom's ideas are at work benefiting all of our people.

Walter J. Hickel served as governor of Alaska from 1966 to 1968 and from 1990 to 1994 and as U.S. Secretary of the Interior from 1969 to 1970. He is the founder of the Institute of the North. His latest book is "Crisis in the Commons: the Alaska Solution."