

## **Creating a New Commons: A Case Study of iCOOP's *Natural Dream Park***

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### I. Introduction

In Gurye, a city in Jeollanam-do, South Korea, a co-operative community has been making a common space in the rural site of a small city in Korea since 2012. The scale of the project is not great. However a wind of change has been blowing hard across the area from this space.

The iCOOP Consumer Co-operative (hereafter, iCOOP) opened the doors of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* in April 2014. Over 150,000 consumer members<sup>1</sup> from seventy-eight member co-ops financed a bigger logistics center, hoping for safe and adequate supplies of food. As a result, *Gurye Natural Dream Park* was founded. It is a common property of iCOOP members. At the very beginning, the space was imagined as only a logistics center. But it has been changed by demands of individual members who wanted it to meet other functions. New additions such as several processing factories, a coffee house, cafeteria, a cinema, and accommodations have been constructed. Everyone has access to the space even though it is the private property of iCOOP. It means that the space is open to the public as well as to its members.

According to the official statistics of iCOOP, over 350,000 people had visited this space from April 2014 to December 2016. The monthly average number of visitors was 13,000 (in 2016) an increase of 200 percent compared to 2014. These figures show only paid visitors of the tour program or the hands-on activity program. *Gurye Natural Dream Park* has 511 workers.

Many young generation Koreans have been moving into Gurye-gun, which is one of the most underpopulated areas in Korea. A glance at the statistics or a visit to the space of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* reveals without a doubt that this space has become quite popular and has helped to activate the local economy.

The local government, the Gurye County office, also values *Gurye Natural Dream Park* as an outstanding case of activating the influx of the population and development of the local economy.<sup>2</sup> The governor said that the county introduced iCOOP to a construction site, which was designated for an agricultural industrial complex in the outskirts of town, and provided steadfast administrative support for the approval procedure of *Gurye Natural Dream Park*. He added that the county helped to make the park into an eco-friendly agricultural complex, including cultural and relaxation facilities. He has asserted on many occasions that the *Gurye Natural Dream Park* prevents Gurye's population from declining and creates a large number of decent jobs helping to revitalize the local community of the Gurye region. He concluded that the social economy is improving in Gurye by virtue of *Gurye Natural Dream Park*.

The case of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* suggests that there could be a new alternative way of developing a community.

## II. Research Purpose

This paper aims to explain the process of arrangement of *Gurye Natural Dream Park*. More concretely, this paper's purpose is to examine how a community creates a commons and does "commoning".

Prior to examination, this paper will present the reasons why *Gurye Natural Dream Park* could be read as a "commons" as defined by Peter Linebaugh's concept. And also this paper

will present the logical basis of why making and operating *Gurye Natural Dream Park* should be defined as “commoning” as per David Bollier’s thought.

There were some rough ideas in the beginning of this research; why don’t we recognize *Gurye Natural Dream Park* as the “commons” of iCOOP community? The creating of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* could be explained as “commoning” by iCOOP KOREA, a co-operatives network,<sup>3</sup> in a rural local community, witnessing the activation of Gurye community through *Gurye Natural Dream Park*. Why don’t we understand the making of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* as “commoning” by various groups including iCOOP KOREA, the regional county, the local community people, and so on?

Before trying to find answers, this paper proposes that assembling and operating the *Gurye Natural Dream Park* could be considered as ‘commoning’.

A co-operative as a community creates a ‘commons’ (as common property resources) in a region. Then the co-operative could open the commons to the public in the area, which seems possible only under a co-operative system. As a result, a common property can be used as common pool resources. A sizable co-operative can afford to buy land and build the public space.

Explaining the process of creating “a commons” by a co-operative may also present practical ideas to local governments on how to make commons and develop communities. For this reason, this paper would be worthy of attention.

### III. Theoretical Frameworks

If you remain beholden to the definition of the ‘commons’ that appeared under English

property, you will never create any commons in practice or understand an already existing commons as such. The commons is regarded as an important way to change the world for the better. This is the reason why this paper takes up the commons discourse. David Bollier was sure that the commons and commoning have great potential in transcending the conundrum of our time and helping build a new society, which is ecologically more sustainable, and also humane (2015).

The idea of the commons is confusing to many contemporary observers because the term “commons” seem to have so many meanings (Bollier, p. 2). This stems both from a famous essay “The tragedy of the commons” written by Hardin as well as from legitimate usages of a term with multivalent meanings. Hardin said that each herdsman in a shared pasture will selfishly use as much of the common resource as possible, which will inevitably result in its overuse and ruin. He argued that the best solution is to allocate private property rights to the resource in question. Most mainstream economists and politicians tend to regard the commons in Hardin’s sense (pp. 5-6). Nevertheless, Hardin is criticized for missing a distinct community in a commons that governs the resource and its usage.

The empirical work of Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues at the US-based International Association for the Study of the Commons was crucial in amassing evidence to counter Hardin’s thesis. Ostrom showed that, in both common-property and common-pool resource systems, commoners have always set rules limiting access to the resources they shared due to their awareness that their long-term livelihood depended on self-imposed limitations (Caffentzis, 2016, p. 96). In short, Hardin regarded the commons as an unmanaged resource; however Ostrom identified the commons as a social institution.

Massimo De Angelis stressed that the most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb “to common” – the social process that creates and reproduces the

commons. This verb was recently brought up by the historian Peter Linebaugh, who wrote a fantastic book on the thirteenth-century Magna Carta, in which he points to the process of commoning, explaining how the English commoners took the matter of their lives into their own hands (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015). Linebaugh emphasized in his book *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (2008), that a commons is not only resources but also a social relationship and is not given but produced through struggles by commoners. According to Bollier, a commons consists not just of a resource, but of a community managing the resource by devising its own rules, traditions, and values. To be a commons, all three - a resource, a community, and rules, traditions, and values - are needed (Bollier, p. 6).

The older notion, including Hardin's sense, was geographically tied to England's territory, ontologically rooted in the use of lands, forests, waters, and the subsoil, and originated historically and politically in the class struggle on the medieval manor. In contrast, the present notion that has taken shape since the 1990s has a wider geographical and historical application, and includes seeds, genes, urban spaces, electromagnetic waves and software programs, languages and cultural works, and many other social realities (Caffentzis, p. 97). Commons are conceived as a product both of struggle and of new forms of cooperation (2016).

This paper departs from older and conservative interpretations of the concept of the 'commons' such as those proposed by Hardin, the UN or the World Bank, and so on. Rather, this paper pays more attention to the present notion and borrows theories of the commons from David Bollier, Elinor Ostrom and Peter Linebaugh in order to explain *Gurje Natural Dream Park*.

Despite the differences in conceptualization and emphasis, it is possible to deduce several areas of agreement concerning the commons. The first is that commons are not given but have to be produced. Secondly, commons are not things or “resources” (a term suggesting commercial use) but relations of cooperation and solidarity. Finally, there can be no commons without “community” (p. 99).

In addition to these three areas, commons are open to everyone, who has rights not to be excluded from the benefit of commons if he or she wants.

#### IV. The iCOOP Co-operative Creates a New Commons

##### 1. *Gurye Natural Dream Park* as a commons

iCOOP KOREA, a consumer co-operative association, was founded in 1997 and operates an eco-friendly and organic food business. iCOOP KOREA aims to spread ethical consumption and production practices through solidarity with member co-ops, which consumers and producers manage together. As of December 2016, 250,980 individual members had joined ninety-one member co-ops of ours. The total turnover in 2016 was 552 billion won (KRW), which forms a considerable amount of the total market share of Korea’s consumer co-op movement.

Due to the rapid increase of the number of iCOOP’s individual members since the end of the 2000s, the co-op outgrew the logistics center’s space, which was located in Suncheon, Jeollanam-do to supply members in Gwangju, Jeollanam-do, and western Gyeongsangnam-do with food. The center needed to move somewhere not far from Suncheon. In the beginning of 2011, information about an agricultural industrial complex being constructed on the town’s

periphery by Gurye county was obtained. iCOOP decided to move into the site, since the expressway near the site was expected to provide easier and faster access to two hub-cities, Daejeon and Busan, and also the land was bought at deeply discounted prices.<sup>5</sup> Gurye County also promised to provide administrative support for smoother progress after reviewing iCOOP's business plans. iCOOP Union's board of directors, which is the decision-making unit on behalf of all individual members, approved the purchase of the site in June 2011.

At the very beginning, the site was for a certain kind of food cluster. Construction on the site began in October 2011. It was called by different names such as *Gurye Natural Dream Complex*, *Gurye Complex*, etc. The name *Gurye Natural Dream Park* was first given around the first half of 2013. Then the word 'complex' was replaced by the word 'park'. It meant iCOOP envisioned the space to function as a leisure and relaxation space for the public, including individual members, as well as a place of production.

The cost of building the park was covered by retained earnings of iCOOP and funds raised from individual members. Until July 2012 they had lent the park about 30 billion KRW (about 27 million US dollars), which was much more than the target-fund.<sup>6</sup> iCOOP wanted individual members to participate in their co-operative association's project economically. Therefore every member could become involved in *Gurye Natural Dream Park* through fund-raising, which would allow members to have a sense of ownership.

This is how over 150,000 members from all around the country have a common space in Gurye, and the way, *Gurye Natural Dream Park* became common property of iCOOP

members.

## 2. “Commoning” of *Gurye Natural Dream Park*

iCOOP KOREA opened the doors of their common space in April 2014. As mentioned above, it is a common property of iCOOP members.

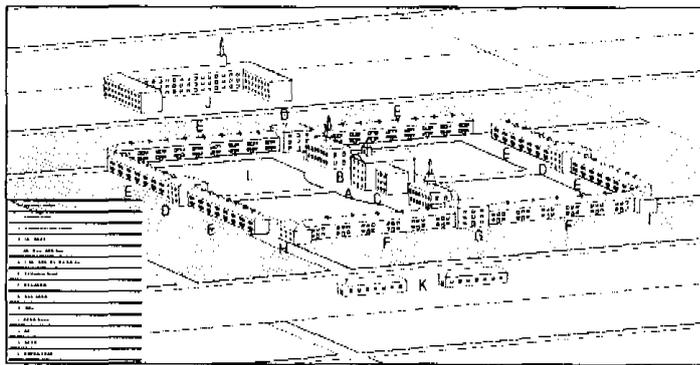
On the site, factories for food processing were built first. After, cultural facilities such as accommodations, an experience center, a movie-theater, a restaurant, a fountain, a grass-square, a coffee-house, and a beer-house, etc. were added leading to *Gurye Natural Dream Park*'s current form. Everyone has access to the space even though it is owned privately by iCOOP, meaning this space is open to the public as well as the co-op members. *Gurye Natural Dream Park* opened the movie-theater to people from Gurye as the town did not possess one. Tours of factories are also open to the public. At *Gurye Natural Dream Park*, visitors, including iCOOP members, could check the food production process during tours of the factories, and have the chance to decide whether to join iCOOP as a member or not.

Successful cooperation among iCOOP, the employees of the park, 10

Gurye County, and local resources was an important factor for establishing *Gurye Natural Dream Park* as a ‘commons’. The spatial structure and certain spaces of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* were also crucial factors for this space being a ‘commons.’ Hence *Gurye Natural Dream Park* finally became ‘common pool resources’ to the people. To them, it doesn’t matter whose it is.

*Gurye Natural Dream Park* has a rectangular shape, which is longer north to south. Its overall

shape is similar to Robert Owen's *co-operative village* that was a sort of quadrangle. However they are quite different. Owen's *co-operative village* assumed a shape of a self-contained, closed community due to the fact that the four sides of the lot were enclosed with buildings (Kim, 2002). By comparison, *Gurye Natural Dream Park* appears to be shaped like an open, extrovert community, because the main road through the park from south to north turns into Yongbang Road, Yongsan Road leading to downtown Gurye (Yeom, 2017).



**Figure 1: Restoration drawing of Owen's co-operative village**



**Figure 2: Gurye Natural Dream Park**

According to Yeom, *Gurye Natural Dream Park* has two access ways, from the east and the south. There are no gatekeepers or barriers to cross at the entrance. There is no special rite of

passage. This means ‘everyone has free access to the place.’ Every facility, even factories, in the space is open to everybody. Therefore strangers can even enjoy a fountain, have a picnic or play a game in the vast grass square without an entrance fee, and walk around the movie-theatre, restaurant, coffee-house, food shop, beer-house, etc. along the streets. Even though the space was built with iCOOP members’ money, it is open to the public.

While assembling and running *Gurye Natural Dream Park*, iCOOP has had a strong link with the local government, the employees of the park, other local co-operatives and some active organizations. A group of active persons from local co-operatives near *Gurye Natural Dream Park* encouraged its members to visit and enjoy the space, hoping their members to think *Gurye Natural Dream Park* belongs to all members, not only to a handful of persons at the iCOOP KOREA headquarter. iCOOP has been actively engaging in local issues with practical and financial support.

All decisions about what to do and what not to do are made by individual members of iCOOP. The Gurye-gun government with Jeollanam-do government<sup>7</sup> was planning ‘an ecological wild flower park and recreation forest town in Mt. Jiri’ project and invited iCOOP to invest in the project. iCOOP also asked for Gurye County’s cooperation to set up an obstetrics clinic. Since the women’s clinic was closed in Gurye because of low population, iCOOP provides a good sum of money every year to reopen and operate the clinic. A nursery facility in an elementary school near *Gurye Park* receives supporting funds from iCOOP. An MOU with a high school and funding for the school orchestra is one of its efforts to be part of the community. With administrative support from Gurye county, *Gurye Natural Dream Park* also decided to launch a ‘Rice Processing Complex’ project in a joint venture with Gurye Agricultural Co-operative. iCOOP also built a housing complex for individual members, the

employees of the park and local people not far from *Gurye Park*. A community center was established in the housing complex in 2016, co-founded by Gurye-gun government and Jeollanam-do government.

It is said that *Gurye Natural Dream Park* stands as one of the meaningful models where a community revitalizes through collaboration between co-operatives and the local government (Oh, 2016). Here is another example: Gurye County commissioned iCOOP to hold a music festival, which iCOOP gladly accepted. Gurye County and iCOOP decided that a rock festival was the best way to attract the young generation, after several meetings to organize the festival. Staff of iCOOP devotedly support business related to the festival, which has been held every August since 2015 at the grass square in *Gurye Natural Dream Park*.

Setting up the movie-theatre and the housing complex and holding the rock festival is also relevant to the fact that iCOOP has regard for local residents as well as the employees of the park. After opening accommodations to the public in 2015, *Gurye Natural Dream Park* has become a place of relaxation for the public as well as iCOOP members. The whole space of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* is open to the public.

*Gurye Natural Dream Park* has certainly become part of Gurye community, and has turned into a ‘commons’(common pool resources).

## V. Conclusion

This paper borrows some definitions of commons from Ostrom, Linebaugh and Bollier to define *Gurye Natural Dream Park* as a “commons”. Moreover this paper refers to Massimo De Angelis’s ‘commoning’ to explain the arrangements for creating *Gurye Natural Dream*

*Park* with cooperation.

At the very beginning *Gurye Natural Dream Park* was planned to meet the economic needs of both iCOOP and Gurye County. They did not approach *Gurye Park* as a commodifiable resource, but rather made it into a commons. Practices of commoning shaping space on a local, use-value-oriented basis, generating a spatiality of difference can become more easily governable and exchangeable under the capitalist system. Such concerns voiced by Sevilla-Buitrago (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015) only remained at the level of concern in the case of *Gurye Natural Dream Park*. iCOOP, Gurye County, the employees of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* and the local residents as commoners who define for themselves the rules according to which they are accessed and used did not allow those things to happen.

De Angelis defines the three elements of the commons as pooled resources, community and commoning. Commons are not simply shared resources. All commons involve some sort of common pool of resources, and are understood as non-commodified means of fulfilling people's needs.

De Angelis explains that communities are sets of commoners. However, they do not necessarily have to be bound to a locality, and could also operate through translocal spaces. iCOOP, Gurye County, the local people, the employees of *Gurye Natural Dream Park* and new co-operatives<sup>8</sup> formed communities by a common pool resource, *Gurye Natural Dream Park*.

Through this article, I have tried to make people, including members, aware that Gurye Park is not a private property but a commons created by commoners of iCOOP members and local residents. There is ongoing effort to manage the resource collectively, with emphasis on fair

access, use, and long-term sustainability. It is needed to evoke again that iCOOP is a co-operative, and has a characteristics of co-operatives, such as a democratic decision-making structure, different from private companies.

Through this article, I have also tried to make people, including members, become aware of that their commoning is of a sort with disobedience movements against capital and authority.

The ideas of commons and commoning are closely connected to those expressed in the anti-capitalist movement claiming that there is always the possibility of finding within the system the very means through which you can challenge it. Resistance is not about an absolute externality or the utopia of a good society. It is about becoming aware of opportunities occurring within the capitalist system and trying to turn them against it (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015).

Thanks to Gurye Park, social relationships in the local communities, which have been strained in recent years, could be improved. Also, the foundation stone of sustainability is laid.

This paper has its theoretical significance in exploring *Natural Dream Park* with the concept ‘commons management system by community’.

The theme of concern for communities by a co-operative has never been researched in relation to “theories of commons” in Korean Co-operative studies. Hence it is hoped that this research will arouse a large number of interesting debates.

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<sup>1</sup> As of the end of 2013, there were 156,666 individual members of iCOOP. (source: iCOOP KOREA 2013 annual report)

<sup>2</sup> New policy plans for community development in an era of depopulation (2017.3.8), *press releases of Gurye county*. Retrieved from <http://www.gurye.go.kr/pro>.

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<sup>3</sup> iCOOP KOREA is a consumer co-operative association that has ninety-one member co-operatives being scattered across the country. This paper thinks iCOOP KOREA is a sort of a network, since ninety-one member co-operatives can have a connection with each other and work together as a system.

<sup>5</sup> Source: May 2011 minutes of iCOOP Solidarity of Consumer Co-operatives'(current Business federation of iCOOP KOREA) board of directors

<sup>6</sup> Source: January to July 2012 minutes of Business federation of iCOOP KOREA board of directors

<sup>7</sup> 'gun' or 'do-government' is a civic unit. The former is smaller unit than the latter.

<sup>8</sup> 'Wagul' co-op taken charge by volunteer guides in Gurye Natural Dream Park is a good example of new co-operatives *Gurye Park* has triggered.

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