Lord of the Flies is a memorable novel about a group of English schoolboys who are marooned on a desert island. They quickly descend into savagery and violence. The book can be seen as a parable of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s view that human life in a state of nature is short, nasty, and brutish.

But there was actually a real shipwreck a number of years after the book was written, and that’s not what happened to the marooned boys at all. In 1965, six boys at an Australian boarding school set sail on a lark and ended up marooned on Ata, a volcanic island that towered over the sea. They stayed there until, through a lucky chance, they were seen and rescued by a passing boat fifteen months later. They had long since been given up for dead. They had managed surprisingly well. Here’s the report of sea captain who found them:

> “By the time we arrived, the boys had set up a small commune with food garden, hollowed-out tree trunks to store rainwater, a gymnasium with curious weights, a badminton court, chicken pens and a permanent fire, all from handiwork, an old knife blade and much determination.’

At the risk of trivializing their achievements, one might say that their story was more “Gilligan’s Island” than *Lord of the Flies.* Their story is a heartening one of human cooperation and ingenuity under immensely challenging circumstances.

There’s a general tendency to believe, like Hobbes, that people become lawless and violent whenever they get the chance. It is this *Lord of the Flies* theory of human nature that fuels the myths of looting and violence after major disasters. As Lisa Grow Sun recounts in her article about disaster myths, reports after Hurricane Katrina portrayed New Orleans as a “snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping, [and] marauding thugs.” Reports of anarchy in the city were later retracted by the media. In fact, she reports, “most of the post-Katrina violence was perpetrated by vigilantes and police.” The myth of post-disaster anarchy leads to over-militarization of disaster response, a punitive attitude toward residents, and a misallocation of resources that could be better used to provide assist rather than control the population. It also overlooks the more positive human response to disasters. Researchers have found that “[m]ost rescue work, including providing first-aid and transportation, is done by disaster victims themselves, as witnessed after the Asian tsunami in 2004, the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC, and the 2005 bombing attacks in London.”

The view that people will naturally look out only for themselves underlies an important theory in environmental law, the Tragedy of the Commons. This theory involves the fate of commonly held resources like medieval pastures open to all villagers, fishing boats on the high seas, and water in arid regions. The theory holds that rational actors will engage in a destructive race to the bottom, each exploiting the commons as intensively and quickly as they can. The result is the destruction of the resource that they all rely on, leaving them all worse off. The global atmosphere can be considered another type of commons, and the implication of this theory is that the world’s nations will dump as much carbon in the atmosphere as quickly as they can.

Fortunately, the tragedy of the commons is by no means inevitable, despite this theory. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economics for her studies of how real communities actually manage common resources. Professor Ostrom showed how those communities managed to create and enforce social norms to protect common resources without recognizing private property rights and without government intervention.

These findings provide a more optimistic vision of the future of the commons. It is for that reason that legal scholar Carol Rose entitled her article about the common resources “The Comedy of the Commons.” She was using the word “comedy” in the “classical sense of a story with a happy outcome.” But more crudely, one might say that Ostrom holds out the possibility that society could be more like Gilligan’s Island than the Lord of the Flies.

Of course, neither view is entirely right. We live in a world that seems to be part tragedy of the commons, part comedy. Without that positive element of human collaboration, our chances of coping with problems like climate change would be dire indeed.