

COLLAPSE

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There are too many mysterious ruins of lost worlds and vanished civilizations in many places of the earth. Historians don't have any satisfactory or convincing answers for questions on the reasons for the decline of the Indus valley civilization, Mayan, and Anesazi civilization of America and several other river valley civilizations around the world. Perhaps the most puzzling remains are the giant stone heads of Easter Island. In the total absence of trees etc., wild guesses like extra-territorial origin have been attributed to these stone heads.

Jared Diamond has attempted to give some sensible and convincing theories for the decline of the ancient civilizations in his brilliant book 'COLLAPSE'. The very title of the book is self explanatory.

Apart from tracing the causes for the collapse of the ancient civilizations, chiefly environmental, he cautions the present generation of humanity that ecocide has now come to overshadow nuclear war and emerging diseases as a threat to human civilization.

Population growth forced people to adopt intensified means of agricultural production (such as irrigation, double cropping, or terracing) and to expand farming from the prime lands first chosen on to more marginal land, in order to feed the growing number of hungry mouths. Unsustainable practices led to environmental damage resulting in agriculturally marginal lands having to be abandoned again. Consequences for society included food shortages, starvation, wars among too many people fighting for too few resources, and overthrows of governing elites by disillusioned masses. Eventually population decreased through starvation, war or disease, and society lost some of the political, economic and cultural complexity that it had developed at its peak.

The processes through which past societies have undermined themselves fall into eight categories whose relative importance differs from case to case (1) deforestation and habitat destruction (2) soil problems (erosion, salinization and soil fertility losses) (3) water management problem (4) over hunting (5) over fishing (6) effects of introduced species on native species, human population growth, and (8) increased per capita impact of people.

The author then gives (Eventually) a five point framework of possible contributing factors—to understand any putative environmental collapse. Four of those sets of factors –environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbours, and friendly trade partners—may or may not prove significant for a particular society. The fifth set of factors—the society's responses to its environmental problems—always proves significant.

The risk of such collapses today is now a matter of increasing concern; indeed, collapses have already materialised for Somalia, Rwanda and some other Third World countries. Many people fear that ecocide has now come to over-shadow nuclear war and emerging diseases as a threat to global civilization. The environmental problems facing the humanity today include the same eight that undermined past societies plus four new ones; human caused climate change, build up of toxic chemicals in the environment, energy shortages and full human utilisation of the Earth's photosynthetic activity. Most of these threats, it is claimed, will become globally critical and within the next few decades; either people solve the problems by then, or the problems will undermine not just Somalia but also First World societies. Much more likely than a dooms day scenario involving human extinction or an apocalyptic collapse of industrial civilization would be "just" a future of significantly lower living standards, chronically higher risks, and the undermining of what people now consider some of the four key values. Such a collapse could assume various

forms, such as the worldwide spread of diseases or else of wars, triggered ultimately by scarcity of environmental resources. If this reasoning is correct, then all efforts today will determine the state of the world in which the current generation of children and young adults lives out their middle and late years.

But the seriousness of these current environmental problems is vigorously debated. Are the risks greatly exaggerated, or conversely are they underestimated? Does it stand to reason that today's human population of almost seven billion, with the potent modern technology, is causing environment to crumble globally at a much more rapid rate than a mere few million people with stone and wooden tools already made it to crumble locally in the past? Will modern technology solve environmental problems, or is it creating new problems faster than it solves old ones?

All of these questions illustrate why those famous collapses of past civilizations have taken on more meaning than that of a romantic mystery. Perhaps there are some practical lessons that people could learn from all those past. Some past societies collapsed while others didn't; what made certain societies especially vulnerable? What, exactly, were the processes by which past societies committed ecocide? Why did some past societies fail to see the messes they were getting into, and that (one would think in retrospect) must have been obvious? What were the solutions that succeeded in the past? If people could answer these questions, they might be able to identify which societies are now most at risk, and the measures could best help them, without waiting for more Somalia like Collapse. □□□