

COLLAPSE

Solving environmental problems, says Jared Diamond in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (575 pp, Penguin Books, 2005) is not a luxury. Nor does declining to solve them save money. He notes the paradox of humans everywhere trying to secure a future for their offspring, but not for the world they'll inhabit. We want to thrive, yet are too often reluctant to nurture the earth which allows us to do so.

Diamond details the collapse or survival of several societies, past and present, hoping we may imitate their successes and avoid their failures. They grappled with deforestation and soil problems, water management, overpopulation, violence, inappropriate cultural biases, and, more recently, human-caused climate change, toxic chemicals and energy shortages.

By using Montana, not in danger of collapse, as his first example, Diamond shows that problems which have already sunk societies past and present are prominent in our own back yards. A marginal climate for agriculture, heavy dependence on imported basic goods and services, environmental degradation from logging and mining, water problems, soil loss and salinization, dangerous dams, threats from introduced exotic species – all put Montana at risk. If it were an isolated island, it couldn't long survive.

His next example is historical. In a few hundred years the inhabitants of tiny remote Easter Island wiped out all land and most sea birds. They used up all the big trees, which meant serious soil erosion and no canoes for ocean

foraging. About 1100 A.D. they began carving, transporting and erecting some 700 colossal stone heads, apparently honoring various chiefs. By the late 1600's they'd passed peak population levels and descended into violence and cannibalism in response to starvation. Military elites took over from priests, all the great heads were toppled, and the few survivors ended cowering in caves.

The world is as isolated in space as that remote Pacific island, and because of vastly increased numbers and technological power, we can destroy our environment much more swiftly and thoroughly than could folks with stone tools.

The collapse of the great Maya civilization in Mexico and Central America shows that the most civilized, creative societies, living in a benign climate, can fail at their peak, here done in by overpopulation, deforestation, soil erosion and politically spurred violence.

The Vikings, resident on Greenland for 450 years, might have endured much longer if they had modified their inherited pastoral, European core values and imitated the Inuit, who survive there still.

Societies which avoided collapse (the New Guinea highlands, Tikopia, Japan between 1700-1868) took care of their forests, practiced population control, and were able to re-think core values.

The fates of China and Australia currently hang in the balance. China leads in much industrial production worldwide, but suffers serious environmental problems. The uniformity of its population and its top-down government mean it *can* solve problems swiftly: but will it? Australia alone among first world nations is re-thinking its

core values, and could turn away from its disastrously uneconomic agricultural identity.

How about the world as a whole? If we go on as we are, Diamond predicts not doomsday or apocalypse, but a significant lowering of living standards, chronic higher risks, and an undermining of key values. But even if China alone among third world nations achieves first world standards, consumption worldwide will double, and current world population is already unsustainable.

Is Diamond an extremist? He tries hard to be balanced and fair, to show pros and cons of both environmentalists and huge corporations. And he supports his assertions carefully.

At the end he remains a cautious optimist, because some countries and some leaders have made choices favoring earth's survival rather than their own short term goals.

A must read, for every responsible citizen. (624 words)