

advanced even further in subordinating to the European Union their national sovereignties for which they used to fight so dearly.

All of these past and recent reappraisals of values that I have just mentioned were achieved despite being agonizingly difficult. Hence they also contribute to my hope. They may inspire modern First World citizens with the courage to make the most fundamental reappraisal now facing us: how much of our traditional consumer values and First World living standard can we afford to retain? I already mentioned the seeming political impossibility of inducing First World citizens to lower their impact on the world. But the alternative, of continuing our current impact, is more impossible. This dilemma reminds me of Winston Churchill's response to criticisms of democracy: "It has been said that Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." In that spirit, a lower-impact society is the most impossible scenario for our future—except for all other conceivable scenarios.

Actually, while it won't be easier to reduce our impact, it won't be impossible either. Remember that impact is the product of two factors: population, multiplied times impact per person. As for the first of those two factors, population growth has recently declined drastically in all First World countries, and in many Third World countries as well—including China, Indonesia, and Bangladesh, with the world's largest, fourth largest, and ninth largest populations respectively. Intrinsic population growth in Japan and Italy is already below the replacement rate, such that their existing populations (i.e., not counting immigrants) will soon begin shrinking. As for impact per person, the world would not even have to decrease its current consumption rates of timber products or of seafood: those rates could be sustained or even increased, if the world's forests and fisheries were properly managed.

My remaining cause for hope is another consequence of the globalized modern world's interconnectedness. Past societies lacked archaeologists and television. While the Easter Islanders were busy deforesting the highlands of their overpopulated island for agricultural plantations in the 1400s, they had no way of knowing that, thousands of miles to the east and west at the same time, Greenland Norse society and the Khmer Empire were simultaneously in terminal decline, while the Anasazi had collapsed a few centuries earlier, Classic Maya society a few more centuries before that, and Mycenaean Greece 2,000 years before that. Today, though, we turn on our television sets or radios or pick up our newspapers, and we see, hear, or read about what happened in Somalia or Afghanistan a few hours earlier.

Our television documentaries and books show us in graphic detail why the Easter Islanders, Classic Maya, and other past societies collapsed. Thus, we have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of distant peoples and past peoples. That's an opportunity that no past society enjoyed to such a degree. My hope in writing this book has been that enough people will choose to profit from that opportunity to make a difference.

Analyze

1. According to Diamond, how does population size affect a society's risk of collapse?
2. Briefly summarize why Diamond suggests the world's most environmentally devastated areas are also the world's most politically unstable areas.
3. How does the concept of globalization as Diamond uses it here relate to the concept of "living downstream" described in the introduction to this chapter? Put another way, how might the environmental problems of one country affect another?

Explore

1. Do you think that people commonly associate the environment with politics? Alternatively, what connotations do you think are more commonly associated with words like "sustainability"? Do you think that Diamond makes a strong argument for the connection between sustainability and social and political unrest? In a group, discuss ways that the public at large might begin to think about sustainability as a means not just of protecting the environment but also of protecting societal stability.
2. Diamond does not use the word "sustainability" in this selection, and yet issues of sustainability are discussed throughout his writing. While it may be unusual to attribute governmental collapse, civil war, or genocide to issues of sustainability, strong connections between them can be made. Using a search engine, research the conditions that brought about a major recent humanitarian crisis (e.g., a massive drought) and compose a short list that links that crisis to issues of sustainability.
3. Using your school's library databases in addition to online search engines, research one of the collapsed civilizations discussed in this selection to determine how the issue of sustainability contributed to its