

Are the parallels between the past and present sufficiently close that the collapses of the Easter Islanders, Henderson Islanders, Anasazi, Maya, and Greenland Norse could offer any lessons for the modern world? At first, a critic, noting the obvious differences, might be tempted to object, "It's ridiculous to suppose that the collapses of all those ancient peoples could have broad relevance today, especially to the modern U.S. Those ancients didn't enjoy the wonders of modern technology, which benefits us and which lets us solve problems by inventing new environment-friendly technologies. Those ancients had the misfortune to suffer from effects of climate change. They behaved stupidly and ruined their own environment by doing obviously dumb things, like cutting down their forests, over-harvesting wild animal sources of their protein, watching their topsoil erode away, and building cities in dry areas likely to run short of water. They had foolish leaders who didn't have books and so couldn't learn from history, and who embroiled them in expensive and destabilizing wars, cared only about staying in power, and didn't pay attention to problems at home. They got overwhelmed by desperate starving immigrants, as one society after another collapsed, sending floods of economic refugees to tax the resources of the societies that weren't collapsing. In all those respects, we moderns are fundamentally different from those primitive ancients, and there is nothing that we could learn from them. Especially we in the U.S., the richest and most powerful country in the world today, with the most productive environment and wise leaders and strong loyal allies and only weak insignificant enemies—none of those bad things could possibly apply to us."

Yes, it's true that there are big differences between the situations of those past societies and our modern situation today. The most obvious difference is that there are far more people alive today, packing far more potent technology that impacts the environment, than in the past. Today we have over 6 billion people equipped with heavy metal machinery such as bulldozers and nuclear power, whereas the Easter Islanders had at most a few tens of thousands of people with stone chisels and human muscle power. Yet the Easter Islanders still managed to devastate their environment and bring their society to the point of collapse. That difference greatly increases, rather than decreases, the risks for us today.

A second big difference stems from globalization. Leaving out of this discussion for the moment the question of environmental problems within the First World itself, let's just ask whether the lessons from past collapses

might apply anywhere in the Third World today. First ask some ivory-tower academic ecologist, who knows a lot about the environment, but never reads a newspaper and has no interest in politics, to name the overseas countries facing some of the worst problems of environmental stress, overpopulation, or both. The ecologist would answer: "That's a no-brainer, it's obvious. Your list of environmentally stressed or overpopulated countries should surely include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Rwanda, the Solomon Islands, and Somalia, plus others."

Then go ask a First World politician, who knows nothing and cares less about the environment and population problems, to name the world's worst trouble spots: countries where state government has already been overwhelmed and has collapsed, or is now at risk of collapsing, or has been wracked by recent civil wars; and countries that, as a result of those problems of their own, are also creating problems for us rich First World countries, which may end up having to provide foreign aid for them, or may face illegal immigrants from them, or may decide to provide them with military assistance to deal with rebellions and terrorists, or may even have to send in our own troops. The politician would answer, "That's a no-brainer, it's obvious. Your list of political trouble spots should surely include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Rwanda, the Solomon Islands, and Somalia, plus others."

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Surprise, surprise: the two lists are very similar. The connection between the two lists is transparent: it's the problems of the ancient Maya, Anasazi, and Easter Islanders playing out in the modern world. Today, just as in the past, countries that are environmentally stressed, overpopulated, or both become at risk of getting politically stressed, and of their governments collapsing. When people are desperate, undernourished, and without hope, they blame their governments, which they see as responsible for or unable to solve their problems. They try to emigrate at any cost. They fight each other over land. They kill each other. They start civil wars. They figure that they have nothing to lose, so they become terrorists, or they support or tolerate terrorism.

The results of these transparent connections are genocides such as the ones that already exploded in Bangladesh, Burundi, Indonesia, and Rwanda; civil wars or revolutions, as in most of the countries on the lists; calls for the dispatch of First World troops, as to Afghanistan, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, the Philippines, Rwanda, the Solomon Islands, and Somalia; the collapse of