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A chance to learn from great crash of Easter Island

> The collapse was so sudden that half-carved statues were abandoned where they stood

Unrestrained growth destroyed an island society – and a new UN plan offers a chance to avoid a global repetition

OPINION

NO MAN, wrote the poet John Donne, is an island. The same now could be said of entire countries, even continents. The worldwide financial crisis is for many people their first wake-up call to the extraordinary fragility of the complex interconnected systems upon which we have come to depend.

In London yesterday, Achim Steiner of the UN's environment programme (UNEP) put the financial crisis into its wider context. Every year, the felling of forests is depriving the world of some $2.5 trillion worth of critical environmental services. These include water supply and filtering, rainfall generation, preventing soil erosion and reducing global warming. That's twice the entire losses in the financial crisis, but these are occurring every year. "We are pushing, if not pushing past, the limits of what the planet can sustain," said Steiner. "If we go on as we are, today's [financial] crisis will seem mild indeed compared to the crises of tomorrow."

According to the UNEP, some 60 per cent of the Earth's natural resources have been severely degraded in just the last quarter century. The UN is now proposing a bold Green New Deal, modelled on the US president Franklin D Roosevelt's project to rescue the US from the Great Depression in the 1930s.

The plan is to direct investment away from speculators on the housing and financial markets and create millions of real jobs worldwide in restoring and conserving natural systems. The Green New Deal aims to mark our liberation from the nihilistic cult of growth-obsessed free market economics.

The extraordinary prosperity that we in the developed world have enjoyed has been based primarily on spending down the planet's natural "capital". Using a fiscal analogy, author Prof Jared Diamond expresses it thus: "Spending capital should not be misrepresented as making money. It makes no sense to be content with our present comfort when it is clear that we are on a non-sustainable course."

Diamond's book, *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or survive*, places our current economic and environmental travails in an acute historical perspective. Consider Easter Island, a tiny dot in the Pacific ocean, a thousand miles from its nearest neighbour. When the first Europeans reached it in 1722, they encountered a primitive, half-starved population of around 2,000 on a seemingly barren island. The mystery that confronted them was the large number of huge carved heads weighing up to 80 tonnes each that were dotted around the island. These were clear evidence of an advanced civilisation, but where was it?

Over the centuries many fanciful stories emerged to explain the Easter Island statues. The facts were more prosaic. Polynesian explorers had, a thousand years earlier, colonised the island. Their success allowed the population to expand to around 15,000.

A dozen or so clans competed with one another for social and religious prestige by constructing ever more elaborate statues. At their peak, up to 500 people were involved in carving, transporting and erecting each of these huge edifices, whose bases could consist of up to 1,000 tons of rock.

The island's forests were gradually cut down to supply ropes and tree trunks needed to make sleds to drag these huge carvings several miles across the island. Deforestation led to rapid erosion of the delicate volcanic soils and soon agricultural output plummeted. Starvation, open warfare and cannibalism followed quickly as the political and religious power of the island elders evaporated.

The only chance of escape was also lost, as all the trees capable of building ocean-going boats were long destroyed. The people of Easter Island were trapped in a hell of their own construction. Failure had become the tragic conclusion of their success.

The crash of Easter Island occurred very soon after it had achieved its peak of population, statue construction and environmental impact. Strangely, no one saw it coming. In a quarry on Easter Island stand the half-carved remnants of statues. The collapse was so sudden they were simply abandoned where they stood.

"The parallels between Easter Island and the whole modern world are chillingly obvious," writes Prof Diamond. "The island was as isolated in the Pacific as the Earth is today in space." Accelerating human impacts are now on a truly planetary scale.

Easter Island is small enough to walk around in a day, so islanders would have been acutely aware of the limits of their world, yet as it deteriorated, tribal competition for prestige intensified and the extravagant production of statues reached its lunatic peak.

The advantage we enjoy over the benighted Easter islanders is that we have history to guide us. But we tend to quickly forget its lessons; our political and corporate elites operate in cycles measured in weeks, not decades, driven by wealth and prestige more often than stewardship.

Other, altogether different outcomes are also possible. In the 17th century, economic expansion on another island nation, Japan, led to massive deforestation and society teetered on the verge of collapse. However, its political leadership recognised the danger and through vigorously enforced conservation measures, reversed the damage.

Today, three-quarters of Japan is covered in forests – a living monument to political prescience and the foundation for its long-term prosperity. Perhaps the UN's Green New Deal offers the same hope for the wider world?

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