

COLLAPSE: How Societies Choose To Fail Or Survive

Jared Diamond, 2005
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COLLAPSE: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive by Jared Diamond revolves around the ominous notion that societies manipulate their destiny based on ecological perspicacity. Diamond compels readers to consider why through history, particular societies flourished, while others waned into oblivion. Do the jungle-festooned relics of ancient civilizations hold cryptic lessons relevant to the modern world? Diamond believes so and to decipher these, guides readers through an inter-continental time voyage to demystify the self-induced phenomenon of "ecocide".

I initially cringed at the prospect of another dreary, Malthusian-inspired rehash telling us we are all condemned. Except, far from suggesting a crude relationship whereby human populations multiply exponentially and food production increases only arithmetically (triggering famine and warfare), Diamond recognizes the situation is more intricate. Catastrophic collapses remain possibilities in the author's opinion, although monumental declines are mitigated by innovative technologies, globalization and medicinal pansophy. Finally, a "dooms-dayer" grounded in reality! Nonetheless, Diamond contends that by exhausting natural resources, humanity undermines survival. He nominates a series of environmental variables, including deforestation, soil depletion, water scarcity and increased per capita impact through which societies engender self-implosion. He views these variables as causative factors in the disintegration of past societies and ingeniously applies these criteria to scrutinize modern societies for symptoms of dissolution.

Although many societies, across differing temporal and geographical scales are examined, contemporary Australia is reserved as Diamond's culminating case where many of his environmental variables converge to form an insidious cocktail of salinization, erosion and extinction. Indeed, Australia's ecological fragility and appalling history of land management makes the Continent the perfect candidate to exemplify the "sirens of collapse" to other advanced economies. Diamond perceives Australia as a prosperous, yet manifestly-abused nation, using the abrasive metaphor of "mining" to encapsulate Australia's post-colonial relationship with natural resources.

In a sobering portrayal, Diamond provides a scrupulous assessment of Australia's land degradation, discussing salinization, land clearing, soil erosion and human-induced drought as products of myopic resource management. Seasoned environmentalists

will already be conversant with the biophysical dynamics and stimuli of these destructive processes and Diamond is unlikely to supplement this understanding. However, scientists need not be dismayed. Diamond's narrative goes beyond explanation to illumination, harnessing personal experience and a refreshingly colloquial tone to contextualize biophysical processes within their cultural ideologies and bureaucratic framework.

For instance, Diamond distinguishes the "Million Acres a Year" programme espoused by the West Australian Government during the 1960s, not simply as a discrete impetus to extensive salinization of the West Australian Wheatbelt, but as the manifestation of a cultural discourse ill-attuned to the Australian environment. Diamond's recognition of complex and intersecting processes is reassuring to readers; indicative of a versatile thinker who is able to disentangle and conceptualize multi-dimensional systems. Many scientists seem incapable of this dialectical thinking, content to engage in categorical theories that isolate, fragment and subsequently prohibit holistic perceptions. However, Diamond defies the atomistic conventions of Western science, articulating synergistic relationships rather than fixating on single, causative attributes. Testament to his relational approach, one reviewer described Diamond as a "pseudonym for a committee of experts". Indeed, readers will delight in the way Diamond assumes the role of ecologist, climatologist, sociologist, geographer, economist and historian in the quest to envision complexity.

The influence of Australian culture in resource management is the author's next interest. Diamond believes Australians cling to the absurd notion of an agrarian-based economy, buoyed by colonial values and a disproportionately influential rural voice in Australian politics. By interrogating the Australian ethos, Diamond claims that maladjusted, British values still resonate in contemporary landscape perceptions and remain culpable for much of Australia's ruinous land degradation. As I watch the response of farmers and governments to the current "drought", I am more than inclined to agree. Hand-feeding sheep in a dusty paddock or ploughing drought-declared fields in hope of rain is tantamount to stripping the land's limited fertility and throwing it into the air or flushing it down the nearest river. Yet governments pay to have it done! Australia's bucolic mystique is essentially its own worst enemy, fostering, as Diamond states, "government support for measures that mine rather than sustain the environment".

Unfortunately, Diamond neglects the role of traditional ecological knowledge in reorientating Australian land management towards a more-sustainable future. Diamond romanticises the historical ability of indigenous peoples to develop "sustainable solutions to the Continent's daunting environmental problems", yet fails to encourage the

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reinstatement of traditional practices. The omission of indigenous knowledge and aspirations disempowers and nullifies a potentially-enriching body of knowledge, reinforcing the post-colonial power relations and paradigms that incite much of Australia's ill-adapted land management regimes. Celebrated ecologist, David Suzuki affirms this notion, contending that indigenous understanding has much to offer Western resource management, principally a sanctity and re-connection with nature. Experiences of the South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage echo this message, demonstrating pragmatic benefits of reconciling traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary land management.

In a suitable climax, Diamond unites his preceding observations to unleash his most contentious proposition; that Australia should seriously consider abandoning agricultural enterprise. Before our undoubtedly, now-inflamed farmers try and excise *Collapse* from national book shelves, Diamond conciliates readers with a convincing economic rationale, stating "while 60% of Australia's land area and 80% of its human water use is dedicated to agriculture, the value of agriculture relative to other sectors of the Australian economy has been shrinking to the point that it now contributes less than 3% of GNP". Diamond believes the true economic cost of Australian agriculture is suppressed, "requiring taxpayer subsidies to sustain an industry that irreversibly converts an environmental capital of soil and vegetation into cash", displacing more viable and less degrading ventures such as tourism, recreation and forestry. Could not have said it better myself! However, Diamond's allegation that tourism, recreation and forestry provide more-sustainable alternatives for Australia is nebulous. In my opinion, these industries can cause environmental travesties comparable to agriculture. For example, tourism ventures readily disturb and displace the natural environment through infrastructure development and over-visitiation. Similarly, recreational pursuits, such as horseriding, trail-bike riding and 4w-driving exacerbate erosion and turbidity, while snorkelling is commonly responsible for structural damage to reef ecosystems. Furthermore, many ecologists describe agroforestry plantations as "biological deserts" that generate a biodiversity deficit and act as latent havens for feral species. Even Diamond espouses the ill-appropriateness of forestry on Australia's nutrient-deprived soils. Unfortunately, Diamond's solution fails to recognize Australia's great ecological and geographical diversity. I believe judicious planning and management, sensitive to local and regional scales should constitute sustainable outcomes, rather than a handful of generic land-use practises.

Furthermore, by trivialising the economic significance of Australian agriculture, Diamond overlooks the reliance of other labour sectors and numerous livelihoods on farm industries. For example, the 2002 National Land and Water Resources Audit reported that 60% of manufacturing turnover in the Murray-Darling Basin was derived from the processing of crop harvests. Although representing only a small portion of Australia's GDP, agricultural industries are strongly export orientated and account for 20% of total export trade. Without agricultural export,

Australia could not afford its addiction to luxury imports, such as automobiles and communications technology. Furthermore, abandoning agriculture would accentuate the spatial concentration of the Australian populus (already 90% of the population live on 3% of the Continent). Such clustering would further strain sensitive coastal and riverine ecosystems and intensify per-capita impacts; one of the variables Diamond nominates as potentially lethal!

Despite being more complex than first envisaged, I am compelled by Diamond's argument to rethink the role of agriculture in Australia (both economically and culturally). Here the author's anthropocentric framework is made explicit. Diamond justifies all his claims through resource longevity, economic rationalism and social perpetuity; emphasizing conservation, not preservation. Still, readers may question the authority this American provocateur holds to make such lurid accusations. Prepare to be dismayed. As a field biologist and Professor of Geography and Environmental Health Sciences, Diamond has authored numerous pioneering texts, including the Pulitzer Prize winning "Guns, Germs and Steel". His accolades include the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, "Genius" Award and two Science Book Prizes. He also has extensive experience as an ecologist in Australia, New Guinea and the Pacific, so is well-acquainted with the region.

In his closing paragraphs, Diamond instils readers with cautious optimism, believing that an emerging environmental ethic is counteracting Australia's degradation. Diamond contends, grass-roots movements, shifting attitudes and radical government initiatives are progressively infiltrating Australian democracy. However, his rendering of Australians, galvanized in some "green revolution" seems insincere considering his foregoing portrayal of the Nation's environmental contempt. Perhaps Diamond's surmise is skewed by his professed love and fascination with the Great South Land? Either way, I remain sceptical of the author's resounding faith in democratic salvation: reinforced by John Howard's (Australia's Prime Minister) refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol or prohibit old-growth logging. Diamond overlooks the fact that necessity breeds change, not the converse. As Hardin expounds, a society of indeterminate beings will not cure the tragedies of liberalist freewill. Stringent legislation, privatization and most-importantly, mass edification remains necessary to prevent gradual environmental decay. It is here the exhortation of *Collapse* is fundamentally lost. People will not relinquish lifestyles of comfort in response to speculative prophecies; the threat must be imminent and perceptible.

Not your typical dooms-day book, *Collapse* is enlightening, insightful and disturbingly prophetic. Readers will appreciate Diamond's colloquial tenor and intuitive wisdom. Diamond's ability to distil past trends and apply these to contemporary societies is brilliant, allowing him to frame solid arguments of ecological heed. However, the text intermittently relies on anecdotal evidence and speculative assumptions from unverified sources, blurring the boundary between fact and fantasy. Although *Collapse* appears conceptually sound — destroy the environment and

we destroy ourselves — readers must be cautioned. Diamond's model of environmental contempt cannot explain the demise of every society. For example, the collapse of the Roman, Ottoman and Egyptian Empires was primed through a combination of political turmoil, civil unrest, increasing taxation, foreign incursion, economic depression and ascendancy of religious cults; loosely coupled with environmental misfortune.

Those salivating at the well-publicized Australian chapter will be disillusioned. Although comprehensive, the chapter lacks profundity, containing little more substance than can be gleaned from a high school geography text. Accordingly, experts will find the chapter more akin to a literature review than epic new text; merely reiterating the imprudence espoused by homegrown ecologists, such as Mercer, Recher and Flannery (from whom much of Diamond's insight is derived). Amateur readers will find *Collapse* illuminative and a valuable preamble to Australia's

environmental problems (although further inclusion of photographs would assist this). However, recent Commonwealth State of Environment Reports or Natural Resource Audits offer readers an equally holistic impression.

Mindful of *Collapse's* international distribution and multi-disciplinary appeal, perhaps the text's most important audience is those who govern the fate of civilizations; the political decision-makers who seemingly relinquish all ecological-sensibility upon assuming office. By appealing to economic rationalism, Diamond conveys a more plausible and pervasive argument than the most vociferous environmentalist. But then again, what does it matter — it is only society at stake! Let us just hope that as Diamond insinuates, humanity can indeed reorientate their practises and salvage civilizations morally-assembled on exploiting the environment. Judging by Diamond's thesis, nature seems less forgiving.

Conserving Marine Environments: Out of Sight Out of Mind

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THIS publication comprises proceedings of a marine conservation forum. Why are marine environments "out of sight out of mind"? Good question, however, I was a little disappointed to find that generally it was not addressed and consequently, I do not believe that this forum has done much to progress marine conservation. For the most part it was only Harry Recher's Forward and the Summary paper by Pat Hutchings and Dan Lunney, which made an attempt to answer this question; they argued for, at least to some extent, the human aspect of marine conservation. That might be a little unfair on Sarah Fairfull and Robert Williams, who in presenting the new age of regional delivery of natural resource management through acknowledged peak regional groups, also acknowledge the role that communities can now serve in setting conservation priorities.

It is from the perspective of a Senior Officer responsible for the development and delivery of the

Regional Natural Resource Management strategy for Western Australia's northern agricultural region, a peak regional natural resource management group in this State, that I have undertaken this review. I am responsible for the development of regional terrestrial and marine resource management strategies and it is from this position that my comments are as much about what I would like to see happening in marine conservation, and particularly in breaking down some of the old barriers like "out of sight out of mind". The currently all-too-common "out of sight out of mind" perspective on marine environments has been a particularly difficult barrier to overcome in developing community aspirations with regard to marine conservation issues.

It seems to me that community attitudes to the marine environment have advanced little over the past decade. Why? It appears that an inherent difficulty remains for both the scientific community and the established bureaucracies to acknowledge and involve the broader community in both scientific discovery and policy development. In particular, Harry Recher argues there is "... too much emphasis on protected areas" and "... not enough attention on off-reserve management ..." and considering that there is essentially "... no fundamental difference between terrestrial and aquatic functions of ecosystems to my mind

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