

LIFT # 21.1 Societal Collapse and the Human Condition

The Metaphor of Easter Island

Edward Renner

For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow." For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."

Easter Island is 1300 miles from the Polynesian islands from which its original inhabitants came. It was first discovered by the Western world in 1722. It was a wasteland with not a single tree over 10 feet tall.

Yet, positioned over the island were some 500 stone statues, up to 70 feet tall and 270 tons.

Carving, transporting, and erecting the statues required a complex populous society living in an environment rich enough to support this nonproductive activity. It took Centuries of anthropological research to solve the mystery.

The first settlers arrived in the 800s A.D. The island had a lush forest of palm trees, 25 species of nesting birds, abundant seafood and good soil.

The increasingly larger statues were ordered by competing tribal Chiefs to confirm their special connection with God. The statues were carved using primitive tools, dragged over roads of logs, and levered into position by hand.

By 1400 all of the palm trees had been cut down, resulting in massive soil erosion and loss of their agricultural base. By 1500 they had no seagoing canoes and no access to wild food.



Around 1680 the Chiefs were overthrown, the statues pull down, and Easter Island's formerly complex integrated society collapsed into starvation, civil war and a descent into cannibalism.



After 1774, European missionaries, slave traders and smallpox were introduced to the small remaining population. All that remained was an isolated barren island populated by massive overturned stone statues erected to aggrandize their creators.

The statues can be seen as similar to the ostentatious display of wealth found in our own society today. To

Jared Diamond, Easter Island is a metaphor for the modern world: “Because of their isolation, there was no place for Easter Islanders to go when they destroyed themselves by over exploiting their own resources. Nor shall we modern earthlings have recourse elsewhere if our global environmental troubles continue to increase.”



Edward Renner is a retired university professor who writes on the modern human challenge of how to live sustainably and peacefully on a crowded planet in the 21st Century. A prepublication draft copy of his most recent book is available at www.livinginthefuturetense.org. He may be reached at erenner@livinginthefuturetense.org.