



## “Collapse”

– How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive, Jarred Diamond

A Diamond In The Rough  
Book Review by Terence Jeyaretnam

*'Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive'* (Viking \$29.95) by Jarred Diamond (Best-selling author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*) is an invigorating book. Invigorating because you have that moment when you start reading it – and that is the moment where you think I would have loved to have written this book!, especially as someone who is a sustainability practitioner. Diamond combines the essences of the rise and fall of civilisations dotted throughout history, with that of present-day environmental calamities like a master chef, delivering an appetising concoction that the audience would lap up. Unlike doomsday scenarios, which are often depressing and sometimes one-sided stories on why the human race will not be sustainable, Diamond gives examples of both past communities that have failed, but also those that have lived sustainably for thousands of years, giving us a glimpse of optimism. He articulates a five-point scale for the success or failure of civilisations – , climate change, hostile neighbours and friendly trade partners, environmental damage and society's response to its environmental problems. Diamond suggests that the first four may or may not prove significant in each society's demise, but claims, that the fifth always does. That is that a society's response to

environmental problems is more or less completely within its control, unlike the other factors. Hence, as his subtitle puts it, a society can “choose to fail.” He puts an all new meaning to the words ‘learning from our past’. As the Sunday Telegraph aptly describes, he is ‘one of the very few scientists to have changed the way we think about history’. Tim Flannery, the author of *The Big Eaters* and *The Weather Makers* will certainly be envious.

Diamond teaches geography at U.C.L.A. and is well known for his best-seller “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” which won a Pulitzer Prize. In “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” Diamond focussed on environmental and structural factors to gauge why Western societies came to dominate the world. In “Collapse,” he continues this theme, but this time he considers societies that made their choices, whether, as he says, to succeed or fail. “Collapse” is mostly a book about the most basic elements of the earth's ecosystem, that when preserved make us more sustainable — flora, fauna, climate and geology — because societies fail, in Diamond's view, when they mismanage those environmental factors.

Diamond examines the lost civilisations of Easter Island, the Maya, and the Norse colony on Greenland to show how a combination of cultural, population, and lack of appreciation for their dependence on natural resources contributed to their collapse. Extending those lessons to today's world, Diamond foreshadows how environmental and population pressures affect present conditions in Haiti and Rwanda, and how events in China, Australia and Montana could follow the same path.

What was then – is what is now. This, is the essence of the book. For those critics that say the Diamond doesn't consider technological advances of our time that could help slow down, or prevent, a potential collapse, I would argue that the environmental issues of today are much more global and widespread.

One day in the middle of the 17th century, the very last tree on Easter Island was cut down. What went through the mind of the person who cut down that last tree?, says Diamond. What indeed went through the mind of the person who killed that (second) last Tasmanian Tiger (the last one dies in captivity)?

And, what would the person who uses the last gallon of petrol be thinking? To reiterate an old Cree Indian saying goes 'Only after the last tree has been cut down/ only after the last river has been poisoned/ only after the last fish has been caught/ only then will you know/that money cannot be eaten'. This is the lesson Diamond encourages us to take away from this book of case studies.

Because Diamond is looking to cover a vast span of time, as well as several serious issues, he does gloss over some key issues, makes significant assumptions, and makes some large omissions, like say the collapse of Rome. But, he weaves around these pot holes, and, in general, provides an account of historical evidence that is compelling and well-conceived. He connects the dots between the collapses of medieval Greenland and the Maya to the seriousness of climate change to the future of the planet by providing a series of present-day examples of mini-collapses, or 'ecocides' (ecological suicides) such as dry land salinity in Australia and the mass murder of Tutsi civilians in Rwanda. Collapse is also a long book, and Diamond is a write that gives away the ending at the very beginning. Like a true scientist, he postulates his hypothesis early, and then sets out to prove it through supporting evidence. Accordingly, one could read the introduction, gloss over the table of contents, and read the last few chapters and get the point. But, then one would miss the true essence of this book, which is what Diamond does best, and that is to tell interesting and captivating stories, like the old Cree Indian perhaps once did, which has stood the test of time.

"The societies that ended up collapsing were (like the Maya) among the most creative and (for a time) advanced and successful of their times...past peoples were neither ignorant bad managers who deserved to be exterminated or dispossessed, nor all-knowing conscientious environmentalists who solved problems that we can't solve today. They were people like us, facing problems broadly similar to those that we now face. They were prone either to succeed or to fail...", lest we forget.

In this realm, one example Diamond has left out, for good reason, because he is not that accurate a prophet, is New Orleans, post Hurricane Katrina. The Boston Globe calls Katrina's real name global warming, and predicts that as the atmosphere warms, it will generate longer droughts, more-intense downpours, more-frequent heat waves, and more-severe storms. New Orleans – collapsed before I managed to experience the jazz, just as we missed the sun-worship of the Inca and the statue building of the Easter Islanders. This is what makes this book so relevant and a case study in history for a range of issues faced by the global community of today.