

**COLLAPSE:
HOW SOCIETIES CHOOSE TO FAIL OR SURVIVE**

Jared Diamond

2006

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Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (2006) is ambitious, topical and thought-provoking. Although the book comes under the heading of history, its content is closely connected with contemporary environmental issues of sustainability, permaculture and humankind's use of natural resources. This linkage between the history of human societies and the environment has become more poignant in recent decades as the threat of climate change becomes apparent in our everyday lives. Today, climate change is a standard broadcast and online news story. How does Diamond define a 'collapse': a drastic decrease in human population and social, economic and political complexity over a wide geographic space over time.

In the Prologue ('A Tale of Two Farms'), Diamond discusses how societies have collapsed in the past. In response, he searches for questions and patterns that contemporary societies can use to prevent such catastrophes. Today's risk of such collapses is evident; indeed, 'collapses' have already materialised for Somalia, Rwanda, and other countries. In the context of humans seriously damaging the natural environment, many experts and activists fear that ecocide has now come to overshadow the threat of nuclear war (p. 7). Diamond distinguishes between two types

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of environmental problems — endogenous (self-inflicted) and exogenous (natural climate change). A third type combines the two.

What makes Diamond's work readable is his enthusiasm and knowledge acquired over decades of research. Although at 528 pages, it is not a book to read over a long weekend, it contains sufficient information about environmental problems and historical research to be read and reflected upon over time—and revisited.² The author's analyses are balanced, and he makes no grand claims about doomsday scenarios or our future.

The book contains four parts: (Part One) Modern Montana, (Part Two) Past Societies, (Part Three) Modern Societies and (Part Four) Practical Lessons. In these parts, Diamond addresses **twelve ecological problems** facing contemporary humankind: Problems one to eight have historically contributed to the collapse of societies in the past –

1. Deforestation and habitat destruction
2. Soil problems (erosion, salinisation, and soil fertility loss)
3. Water management problems
4. Overhunting of local wildlife
5. Overfishing of the seas
6. Effects of introduced animal and plant species on indigenous species
7. Human population growth
8. Increased per-capita impact of people
9. The photosynthetic ceiling (maximum capacity to manufacture organic compounds)
10. Energy extraction and consumption
11. Toxic chemicals
12. Atmospheric changes

In the above list, points 1 to 3 relate to the loss of natural resources; points 4 to 8 refer to ceilings on natural resources; and points 9 to 12 consider harmful things as an output of human activities (p. 486).

² Thoughtfully, Diamond has included a further reading section at the back of the book which is over 30 pages in length. This section is divided by 16 chapter headings, and indeed encourages the keen reader or student to further pursue their research.

Furthermore, Diamond also uses a **five-point checklist of factors in studying societal and civilisational collapse** (p. 11); he considers studying these factors necessary ‘...in trying to understand any putative environmental collapse’. They are (i) environmental damage caused by the society (endogenous), (ii) natural climate change, (iii) hostile neighbours, (iv) problems with friendly trade partners, and (v) critical issues with the society’s socio-political, economic and cultural institutions; collectively, they ‘*may or may not prove significant for a particular society*’. As a result, much depends on how humans or governments respond to these five problems. A collapse can be gradual or not; alternatively, the government can manage and divert it.

The book’s historical and geographical analysis is focused upon the past societies of Easter Island, Pitcairn and the Henderson Islands, the North American Anasazi and their neighbours, the Central American Maya civilisation, the Viking settlers of Greenland, and the modern societies of Rwanda, Haiti and Dominican Republic, China, and Australia. Part One is a detailed study of the North American state of contemporary Montana, its environment, and society.

Part One: Modern Montana (Chapter One)

In Chapter One (‘Under Montana’s Big Sky’), Diamond’s study is engaging and revealing. His United States roots and residence in Montana add to this understanding, empathy and motivation. His local knowledge shows through his writing. The picture he paints of the mid-western state is intriguing. Despite the region’s natural beauty, the federal government in Washington and private companies have failed to resolve several major environmental and social issues concerning forestry, soil erosion, water quality, air pollution, employment opportunities, and gated communities.

Part Two: Past Societies (Chapters Two to Nine)

Chapter Two (‘Twilight at Easter’) on Easter Island, Chapter Three (‘The Last People Alive’) on Pitcairn and Henderson Islands, Chapter Four (‘The Ancient Ones’)

on the Anasazi, and Chapter Five ('The Maya Collapses') on the Maya discuss collapses detailed in several contemporary texts, academic and popular histories. Rather than repeat the words of others and paraphrase Diamond, I suggest to the reader that each of these chapters is suitable for a general understanding of these regions, islands and peoples. Each is about 20 to 30 pages long and, therefore, not too long to read. Diamond's work is well structured, and this is helpful because the reader moves between sections on geography, local politics (of the masses and the elites), economics, religious studies, climate change, archaeology and environmental issues.

Readers who enjoy the Viking history of the West Atlantic are in for a real treat in Chapters Six to Eight ('The Viking Prelude and Fugues'; 'Norse Greenland's Flowering'; 'Norse Greenland's End'), Diamond details the two critical settlements established on Greenland by the Vikings—and contemplates how and why they collapsed. These Scandinavian settlers were part of a westward expansion of the adventurous Norwegian sailor-farmer-marauders. They moved on from the Shetland Islands, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and finally, a group settled in Greenland, so named as a ruse to get settlers to migrate there as it is a harsh climate. Greenland was not the last stop; we learn about the 'Viking discovery' of Newfoundland (Vinland) in about 1000 CE and, hence, North America for European society. Diamond comments that had it not been for a large number of Native Americans, the Viking Greenlanders might have survived their ecological challenges, and the Vinland settlers might have become a viable settlement. In that case, Diamond says Vinland might have undergone a natural population explosion; the Norse might have spread over North America, and North American history might have been very different (p. 210).

Returning to Greenland, we are told that early Norse migrants were fortunate to find a virgin landscape untouched by agriculture or forestry, suitable for pasture, with a livable climate, with precious walrus ivory tusks available for the European market (when ice did not prevent sea travel), and with no Native Americans close by their settlements (p. 248). We are informed that the Norse lived a harsh existence in their

Greenland colony. Significantly, they retained their Christianity and sense of 'North European identity'. Diamond considers this honourable and understandable but also problematic. He raises several questions: why did the Norse refuse to adopt Inuit dress (that was better suited to the local climate)? Why did the Norse not intermarry with the Inuit? Why did the Norse refuse to adopt Inuit hunting techniques and tools? (p. 246).

Chapter Nine ('Opposite Paths to Success') is intriguing and explains how and why ancient societies such as the Pacific Island of Tikopia (pp. 286-293) and Japan (pp. 294-306) have managed to sustain their societies. In contrast, others collapsed or else are currently struggling. In reference to environmental planning and the historical experiences discussed in examples throughout *Collapse*, Diamond states that proactive leaders can influence top-down and impact society. Equally active citizens can change policies from the bottom up (p. 306).

Part Three: Modern Societies (Chapters Ten to Thirteen)

Chapter Ten ('Malthus in Africa') discusses the modern history of Rwanda and the genocide within that country during the 1990s. It is a shocking read, and Diamond argues that we should not confine the events to claims, actually made at the time, that the aggression and violence were the cause of long-suppressed ancient ethnic hatreds; instead, he examines economic conflicts and communal pressures caused by population growth and environmental degradation. It is one of Diamond's more sympathetically written chapters; he explains the terror inflicted by the Hutus on the Tutsis clearly and with some understanding (pp. 311-328).

Chapters Eleven ('One Island, Two Peoples'), Twelve ('China, Lurching Giant'), and Thirteen ('Mining Australia') discuss the Dominican Republic, Haiti, China and Australia's modern societies. China is the topic of many books and television documentaries; in that country, the pressures caused by human needs and industry on the land, soil, air, and water are problematic and growing. In this case,

Diamond highlights the darker side of industrial development, especially in the context of environmental damage caused by extraction and manufacturing.

A significant factor in the Australian story is the poor soils of that land and the need to import many crops that other countries would take for granted. Introducing alien species like rabbits, foxes, and plant life that were unsuitable to the environment caused problems (and this conceptual discussion is expanded in Chapter Fourteen ('Why Do Societies Make Disastrous Decisions')). A point is made about the cultural values of the Australians; for example, they do not eat kangaroo meat, rather like the Greenland Vikings refusing to eat fish (because fish was associated with the Inuit). Sheep farming was introduced because the first British settlers wanted to eat roast lamb and wear woollen clothes. The problem is the size and scale of that industry and what the land can sustain. Australia's human population is considered; debate reflects upon the government policies about the ethnic origins of this group and the ideal size that this population should be in relation to the environment (approximately eight million and growing). The exploitation of the country's natural resources, particularly mining, is examined in terms of its effect on the environment.

The chapter's most revealing and exciting story is that of the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic and the other country it shares an island with, namely French-influenced Haiti. The history, economic development, and authoritarian top-down rule (by Balaguer in the Dominican case and Papa Doc Duvalier and 'Baby Doc' in Haiti) that these countries have experienced are reviewed. In particular, their impact on the local forests, water supplies, mining and society is detailed (and based on Diamond's travels to the Dominican Republic). Diamond reports that environmental issues in the Dominican Republic represent eight of the twelve factors above: *'forests, marine resources, soil, water, toxic substances, alien species, population growth, and population impact'*, writes Diamond (p. 349). He writes that the contrasting case studies of Haiti and the Dominican Republic and that of the Norse

and the Inuit in Greenland explain how a society's destiny is in its own hands and mainly based upon choices of its own making (p. 341).

Part Four: Practical Lessons (Chapters Fourteen to Sixteen)

In Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen, Diamond examines the ‘...oft-complicated reasons why people do or don't pursue environmentalist policies’ (p. 346) and why societies make the decisions they do. Arguably, these are the most thought-provoking chapters in the book, at least in explaining why societies decline or seem to fail to respond to the perception of environmental problems. Diamond clarifies that he is not advocating ‘environmental determinism’ (p. 417). Chapter Fourteen (‘Why Do Some Societies Make Disastrous Decisions?’) analyses the theories about human and group motivation, action and inaction. Diamond then analyses four factors contributing to the failures within group decision-making (p. 421). These are firstly, the failure to anticipate the problem (p. 421); secondly, when the problem materialises, the group might fail to realise it (p. 424); thirdly, and even if they perceive a problem, they might fail to find a solution (p. 427), fourthly, their attempts to resolve the problem might fail (p. 429).

Chapter Fifteen (‘Big Business and the Environment: Different Conditions, Different Outcomes’) investigates big business and the environment and looks at the different conditions in world regions and historical cases and the outcomes of resource extraction and utilisation. Industries reviewed are oil, mining, logging, and fishing.

Chapter Sixteen (‘The World as a Polder: What Does It All Mean to Us Today’) investigates the major environmental threats to humankind and their possible timescale, and ‘*What can I do as an individual?*’ (p. 487). Diamond looks at the loss in terms of our effect on the natural environment: the loss or dwindling of wild foods (such as fish) and aquaculture; loss of species (animal and plant) and biodiversity issues; loss of resources like fresh water—and the wind erosion of soils of farmland. Next, Diamond considers ceilings, the use of fossil fuels, the use of water, rivers, and lakes, and the capacity of photosynthesis (which depends on soil fertility). Following

on is an analysis of chemical and industrial pollution of the air and water; the environmental impact of 'alien species' of animals and plants; human activity that releases gases into the atmosphere, thus damaging the ozone layer or impacting the volume of greenhouse gases; human population (that requires feeding, energy, space, homes, services). However, what is significant here is not the number of humans but their environmental impact. The author notes that many people in non-Western societies desire the material lifestyle and mass consumption of the United States, Europe and Japan (p. 494). Diamond expresses that all these points (problems) are interlinked. The ideal solution would be environmentally sustainable governmental policies and societies—but how do we get to this point peacefully? (p. 498)

Cautiously Optimistic

Diamond's twelve environmental problems or points highlighted above are legitimate grounds for debate, discussion, disagreement and argument. Arguments critical or questioning of the ecological debate are many. Some observers see the environmental concern to be detrimental to the economy; some people suggest that technology will solve our problems; some say we can always find another resource if one runs out (for instance, the 'Green Revolution' solved the food problem), some say we should transport food to where it is needed most? Indeed, look around: the supermarkets are full of stock, and we live longer now than before; is it that the environmentalists and eco-warriors are 'doom-mongers'? Perhaps the human population will level off at some point in the future; maybe the environmental concerns are the ideas of Western middle-classes or Green activists; the environmental meltdown occurs after I die anyway, so why should I care? (pp. 503-514). Diamond remarks that reducing our impact on the earth will be challenging but possible. The internet, greater democratisation, Green activists, and the online and mainstream media have informed public opinion in new and original ways. Ultimately, it is about choices and opportunities for all, hopes, courageous leaders, long-term thinking, and managing shared resources fairly and better (pp. 521-524).

Lastly, this book is absorbing, though a little long. However, for students and scholars of the history of the environment and ecology, it is important to understand Diamond's core message to creatively and sensitively establish new ways of sustainable living. Likewise, it is crucial that such a study does not generate unnecessary fear about extensive societal-economic, financial and industrial meltdowns. For this reason, Diamond's outlook at the beginning of the book is revealing: *'Thus, I am writing this book from a middle-of-the-road perspective, with experience of both environmental problems and of business realities'* (p. 17). Whatever natural and human-made crises humankind will face in the future, one thing is for sure: we are the species with the creativity, imagination, and mental and physical resilience to find solutions and adapt to new ways of living appropriate to the changing environmental circumstances.

Sevket Akyildiz's review of Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail Or Survive*, London: Penguin, 2006.