

End Game on Easter Island: A Sign of Things to Come?

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Earth Writ Small: A Trip to Rapa Nui, and Some Lessons Learned

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Rapa Nui (Easter Island) is the most isolated place of human habitation in the world. It is famed for its iconic statuery and as a tragic example of ecological collapse and the effects of piratical colonization. This past summer I travelled to Rapa Nui with my son Evan Peacock and another student, Dillon St. Jean, to photograph, film, and learn as much about the island as a ten-day visit would permit. I'll recount some of the high (and low) points of our trip, and ask whether we learned anything that might help answer this question: Is it necessarily the case that planet Earth can be, in the end, nothing more than "Easter Island writ large"?

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Kent contemplates a moai at Hanga Roa, August 8, 2014. The moai seems unimpressed with the gringo philosopher.
(Picture by Evan Peacock.)





Courtyard, Hotel Manavai, Rapa Nui. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 9, 2014.)



Ahu Tahai Complex, with Hanga Roa in the background. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 11, 2014.)



Moai with coconut-shell eyes, Tahai. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 11, 2014.)



Dillon St. Jean and Evan Peacock at Orongo, August 11, 2014. (Picture by Kent Peacock.)



In the Birdman ritual, young braves would climb down these cliffs and swim out to those islands to retrieve an egg of a sea bird. Not all of them came back. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 11, 2014.)



Entrance to stone house (restored) at Orongo. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 11. 2014.)



Crater of Rano Kau. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 11, 2014.)



View to NE from Puna Pao (quarry where topknots, or *pukao*, were made) showing farms and reforested area.
(Picture by Kent Peacock, August 11, 2014.)



Ahu a Kivi; the moai represent seven Polynesian kings; they face westward toward their homelands, and thus are among the few moai to not be facing landward. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 11, 2014.)



Colossal moai (“the fifteen”) at Ahu Tongariki, August 12, 2014. (Picture by Kent Peacock.)



Ahu Tongariki, from the NE, August 12, 2014. (Picture by Kent Peacock.)



Colossal unfinished moai at Rano Raraku; 21 m in length with estimated weight of over 250 tonnes. (Picture by Kent Peacock, August 12, 2014.) Oral tradition holds that it was *this particular statue* that triggered the violent overthrow of the statue culture.



Moai at Anakena, raised by Thor Heyerdahl and locals in 1950s, using traditional methods. (Picture by Kent Peacock.)



Thoughtful moai. (Picture by Evan Peacock.)



Fallen moai (called Paro) at Ahu Te Pito Kura; (picture by Kent Peacock, August 13, 2014.) Paro is estimated to be the tallest moai on the island. There are plans underway (as of August 2014) to restore and raise this statue.



Magnetic stone, the “Navel of the World,” at Te Pito Kura.



Magnetic rock (“navel of the world”); picture by Evan Peacock (August 13, 2014).



Scaling down to subsistence: a recent manavai (designed to protect plants from wind and salt spray).



Waiting to board, Mataverí Airport, August 15, 2014. Our LAN Boeing 767-300 is being refueled. Petroleum is for now the lifeline that keeps the island alive, but how long can that last?

A Lesson in Humility

- If there is one thing I gained from my trip to Rapa Nui, it was an intense awareness of how little I really know about what happened there.
- Some other points that stand out:
 - Complex human societies cannot survive without generous flows of resources; energy in some form (food, oil, nuclear, etc. ...).
 - Complex societies, more broadly speaking, depend upon the “ecosystem services” (clinical term!) of the lands and waters that support them.

Statues and Food

- In order to produce those colossal statues, the islanders must have been able to produce quite a bit of food in excess of their basic survival needs (that is, their needs if they had been able to do nothing but produce enough food and the artifacts needed for bare survival).
 - What we see at sites such as Ahu Tongariki is the result of a great deal of food being transformed into statuary.
- Hence, even if our knowledge of the historical detail is sketchy and unreliable, we can infer that for a few hundred years at least the islanders enjoyed enough material abundance that it was *physically possible* for them to do such work as Tongariki.

Boundary Conditions

- At the other end of the historical scale, it is pretty clear that before the European incursion of the 19th century, the Rapa Nui had become rather skillful subsistence farmers and managed to eke out an existence, with a much reduced population, after their forests and several supporting species (such as certain sea birds) were gone.
- So this gives us boundary conditions: abundance at one end, subsistence at the other.
- There must have been a transition point between the two states, though we have to work cautiously from various pieces of historical evidence (such as our guide's oral tradition) to infer the shape of the curve.

End Game

- Comparison with the Rapa Nui in ca. 1600 and humanity today:
 - We have an intense debate about whether we “can afford” the cost of moving off fossil fuels to renewables.
 - As if we had a choice!
- For the Rapa Nui, it came to the point at which they *had no choice* but to “move off statues.”
- It was like that point in the end game in chess in which the losing player simply runs out of moves.

Time's Up!

- Why? It was *physically* impossible to continue; they *could not* grow enough food to support the practice.
 - It did not help that at the same time an influential segment of their population felt that there was something to be gained by letting the statues get bigger and bigger.
- The result was that their inevitable transition from an abundance economy to a subsistence economy was managed very badly; there is much evidence that it was abrupt and violent.
 - Ironically, it led to the destruction of their statues, which were the only potentially enduring products of their period of abundance.

We Are They

- Obvious questions:
 - Why could the Rapa Nui not control their population?
 - Why did they keep making their moai bigger precisely when it was becoming too expensive in food to do so?
- Good questions, *but* the point is not to blame, but to understand—for *we are all Rapa Nui*.
- Finitude, vulnerability, tragedy—these are the themes that resonated for me after our short stay in this amazing place.

The Bigger Picture

- Obviously, the question we must ask is this: will something analogous happen on a planetary scale?
- Is Earth merely Rapa Nui writ large? Will we “Easter Island” the planet?
 - Drastic reduction to subsistence ecology on global scale?
 - Drastic downsizing of population?
 - Destruction and loss of humanity’s cultural achievements?
- I think that the answer to this is, *not necessarily*.
- But the first step in preventing this sort of global-scale catastrophe is to recognize and acknowledge the risk!



The glowering figure at Ahu Tahai, sunset, August 14, 2014. (Picture by Kent Peacock.)