

What destroyed the civilisation of Easter Island?

- A** Easter Island, or Rapa Nui as it is known locally, is home to several hundred ancient human statues – the *moai*. After this remote Pacific island was settled by the Polynesians, it remained isolated for centuries. All the energy and resources that went into the *moai* – some of which are ten metres tall and weigh over 7,000 kilos – came from the island itself. Yet when Dutch explorers landed in 1722, they met a Stone Age culture. The *moai* were carved with stone tools, then transported for many kilometres, without the use of animals or wheels, to massive stone platforms. The identity of the *moai* builders was in doubt until well into the twentieth century. Thor Heyerdahl, the Norwegian ethnographer and adventurer, thought the statues had been created by pre-Inca peoples from Peru. Bestselling Swiss author Erich von Däniken believed they were built by stranded extraterrestrials. Modern science – linguistic, archaeological and genetic evidence – has definitively proved the *moai* builders were Polynesians, but not how they moved their creations. Local folklore maintains that the statues walked, while researchers have tended to assume the ancestors dragged the statues somehow, using ropes and logs.
- B** When the Europeans arrived, Rapa Nui was grassland, with only a few scrawny trees. In the 1970s and 1980s, though, researchers found pollen preserved in lake sediments, which proved the island had been covered in lush palm forests for thousands of years. Only after the Polynesians arrived did those forests disappear. US scientist Jared Diamond believes that the Rapanui people – descendants of Polynesian settlers – wrecked their own environment. They had unfortunately settled on an extremely fragile island – dry, cool, and too remote to be properly fertilised by windblown volcanic ash. When the islanders cleared the forests for firewood and farming, the forests didn't grow back. As trees became scarce and they could no longer construct wooden canoes for fishing, they ate birds. Soil erosion decreased their crop yields. Before Europeans arrived, the Rapanui had descended into civil war and cannibalism, he maintains. The collapse of their isolated civilisation, Diamond writes, is a 'worst-case scenario for what may lie ahead of us in our own future'.
- C** The *moai*, he thinks, accelerated the self-destruction. Diamond interprets them as power displays by rival chieftains who, trapped on a remote little island, lacked other ways of asserting their dominance. They competed by building ever bigger figures. Diamond thinks they laid the *moai* on wooden sledges, hauled over log rails, but that required both a lot of wood and a lot of people. To feed the people, even more land had to be cleared. When the wood was gone and civil war began, the islanders began toppling the *moai*. By the nineteenth century none were standing.