**The Truth About Easter Island:**

**A Sustainable Society Has Been Falsely Blamed For Its Own Demise**

Written on October 12, 2017

By Catrine Jarman, PhD Researcher in Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Bristol

**Introduction**

Few places on earth are as well known for their so-called mysteries as that of Easter Island, or Rapa Nui. For a tiny island of 64 square miles, with its nearest neighbor some 1,300 miles away, it has seen more than its fair share of controversy.

Recently, Rapa Nui has become the ultimate parable for humankind’s selfishness, a moral tale of the dangers of environmental destruction. In the “ecocide” hypothesis popularized by the geographer Jared Diamond, Rapa Nui is used as a demonstration of how society is doomed to collapse if we do not sit up and take note. But more than 60 years of archaeological research actually paints a very different picture, and now, new genetic data sheds further light on the island’s fate. It is time to demystify Rapa Nui.

**The “Ecocide” Narrative Does Not Stand Up**

The ecocide hypothesis centers on two major claims. First, that the island’s population was reduced from several tens of thousands in its heyday, to a diminutive 1,500 - 3,000 when Europeans first arrived in the early 18th century.

Second, that the palm trees that once covered the island were callously cut down with disregard by the Rapa Nui population to move statues. With no trees to anchor the soil, fertile land eroded away resulting in poor crop yields, while a lack of wood meant the islanders could not build canoes to access fish or move statues. This led to inter-tribe warfare and eventually, cannibalism.

But is this really the case?

The question of population size is one that anthropologist still cannot convincingly answer. Most researchers agree on estimates somewhere between 4,000 - 9,000 people, although a recent study looked at likely agricultural yields and suggested [the island could have supported up to 15,000 people.](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fevo.2017.00069/full)

But there is no real evidence of a population decline prior to the first European contact in 1722. Ethnographic reports from the early 20th century provide oral histories of warfare between competing island groups. The anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl - most famous for crossing the Pacific in a traditional Inca boat - took these reports as evidence of a huge civil war that culminated in a battle in 1680, where the majority of one of the island’s tribes was killed. Obsidian flakes or “mata’a” littering the island have been interpreted as weapon fragments testifying to this violence.

However, recent research lead by [Carl Lipo has shown that these were more likely domestic tools](https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/02/160222-easter-island-rapa-nui-collapse-archaeology-moai-mataa-warfare-weapons-Jared-Diamond/) or implements used for ritual tasks. Surprisingly few of the human remains from the island show actual evidence of injury, just 2.5%, and most of those showed evidence of healing, meaning that attacks were not fatal. Crucially, there is no evidence, beyond historical word of mouth, of cannibalism. It’s debatable whether 20th century tales can really be considered reliable sources for 17th century conflicts, [as recent research has shown](https://www.livescience.com/63321-easter-island-collapse-myth.html).

**What Really Happened to the Trees**

More recently, a picture has emerged of a prehistoric population that was both successful and lived sustainably on the island up until European contact. It is generally agreed that Rapa Nui, once covered in large palm trees, was rapidly deforested soon after its initial colonization around 1200 C.E. Although micro-botanical evidence, such as [pollen analysis](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S003358940700141X), suggests that the palm forest disappeared quickly, the human population may only have been partially to blame. The earliest Polynesian colonizers brought with them another culprit, namely the Polynesian rat. It seems likely that [rats ate both palm nuts and sapling trees](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-mystery-of-easter-island-151285298/), preventing the forests from growing back. But despite this deforestation, my own research on the diet of the prehistoric Rapa Nui people found that they [consumed more seafood and were more sophisticated and adaptable farmers](https://newatlas.com/easter-island-archaeology-environment/50427/) than previously thought. Moreover, it also seems that the [rats became a prime food source](https://www.livescience.com/39926-easter-islanders-ate-rats.html) for the Rapa Nui as well.

**Blame Slavers - Not Lumberjacks**

So what - if anything - happened to the native population for its numbers to dwindle and for statue carving to end? And what caused the reports of warfare and conflict in the early 20th century?

The real answer is more sinister. Throughout the 19th century, South American slave raids took away as much as half the native population. By 1877, the Rapanui [numbered just 111](https://www.counterpointpress.com/dd-product/statues-that-walked/). Introduction of disease, destruction of property, and enforced migration by European traders further decimated the natives and lead to increased conflict among those remaining. Perhaps this, instead, was the warfare the ethnohistorical accounts refer to and what ultimately stopped the carving.

It had been thought that South Americans made contact with Rapa Nui centuries before the Europeans, as their [DNA can be detected in modern native inhabitants](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822%2814%2901220-2). A new study by paleogeneticist Lars Fehren-Schmitz questions this timeline. Analysis of Rapanui human remains dating to before and after European contact found no significant gene flow between South America and Easter Island before 1722. Instead, the considerable recent disruption to the island’s population may have impacted the modern DNA.

Perhaps, then, the takeaway from Rapa Nui should not be a story of ecocide and a Mathusian population collapse. Instead, it should be a lesson in how sparse evidence, a fixation with “mysteries”, and a collective amnesia for historic atrocities caused a sustainable and surprisingly well-adapted population to be falsely blamed for their own demise.

And those statues? We know how they moved them; the local population knew all along. [They walked](https://www.livescience.com/37277-easter-island-statues-walked-there.html) - all we needed to do was ask. In fact, check out this video of one of the [Moai walking](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5YR0uqPAI8&disable_polymer=true).