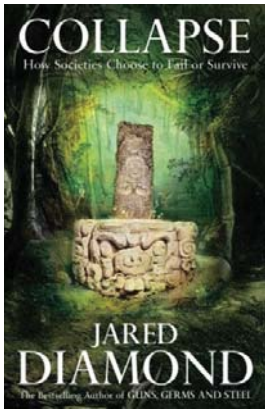


A Diamond in the rough - Jarred Diamond

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive



'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)?

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