

CHAPTER 1

Easter Island as an Icon

... and we named the land Easter Island, because we discovered and found it on Easter Sunday.

Journal of Jacob Roggeveen, 5 April 1722

A Green History

In November 1992, the British historian Clive Ponting gave a lecture to a jam-packed auditorium at Groningen University about his book *A Green History of the World*, which had been translated into Dutch soon after its publication the previous year.¹ The book had made a deep impression because of its unique perspective: previous accounts of world history had been told from the viewpoint of kings and rulers, or even of ordinary citizens, but never before had the history of the world been examined from an ecological perspective. Ponting wondered how civilizations throughout the ages had treated their natural environment and how their interaction with it had affected their development. His most significant finding was that in many cases a reciprocal relationship with nature was of decisive importance for the continued existence of a culture. Proper use of natural resources leads to prosperity and sustainability, whereas overexploitation and pollution not only harm the environment, but can sap a culture of its vitality and ultimately cause its collapse. The downfall of highly developed and complex civilizations had long been an object of study, but Ponting took a surprising approach by considering the way people treat the environment as the principal determinant of a culture's longevity.²

Ponting's most striking example of cultural collapse was the dramatic fate of Easter Island. On this tiny speck in the Pacific Ocean – the most remote inhabited island on earth – Polynesian settlers succeeded in developing a spectacular statue cult that continues to fascinate the

world. During the island's heyday, around AD 1400, hundreds of colossal stone statues marked the landscape. But, Ponting argued, the island's culture took its toll. The trees that once covered the island were felled and used to make fires and build canoes, as well as to transport the statues to their destinations around the island. The resulting erosion allegedly caused a decline in food production, leading to a downward spiral of hunger, war and even cannibalism. The population plummeted, the statues were deliberately toppled, and the forces driving these changes undermined the social structure. This highly developed culture suffered a complete collapse. The entire process – rise, heyday, fall – took only a few centuries to unfold, so that by the time Dutch explorers visited the island, all they saw were the neglected and impoverished remains of a once flourishing civilization. In Ponting's words: 'The Dutch Admiral Roggeveen, on board the *Arena*, was the first European to visit the island on Easter Sunday 1722. He found a society in a primitive state with about 3,000 people living in squalid reed huts or caves, engaged in almost perpetual warfare and resorting to cannibalism in a desperate attempt to supplement the meagre food supplies available on the island.'

To take full advantage of Ponting's visit to Groningen, the Department of Energy and Environmental Science – where I then worked – held a symposium the day after his lecture. Ponting received remarkably strong support for his approach. Many speakers emphasized the lessons to be learned from the tragic loss of a culture such as the one he had so vividly described. What would be the outcome of our own overexploitation of the earth's natural resources? Did the same laws of nature apply to today's global culture? Was our own society headed for disaster?

In my talk, I questioned the characterization of the culture of Easter Island as 'highly developed'. Was that an apt description of a population that had persisted in a way of life so patently harmful to its survival? How could a highly developed society fail to recognize that its obsession with stone statues was leading to its ruin? Perhaps the Easter Islanders would have done better to confine their statue making to small works in wood or stone, but in that case the island would have remained as unknown and unexciting as Hiva Oa – just one of the hundreds of Polynesian islands whose names mean little or nothing to us. What provoked such self-destructive and obviously unsustainable megalomania? And what does this tell us about our own 'highly developed' culture, particularly as we now realize, more poignantly every day, that we are heading down a similar path of self-destruction? Evidently the quality of life we have come to demand is at odds with its sustainability. Asking questions, however, is usually easier

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than answering them, and this certainly proved true at that symposium, where plenty of issues were raised but nothing was resolved.

In 2002, I was appointed to a professorship at the VU University, Amsterdam,³ where I assumed the task of conducting research and instructing students in the cultural and philosophical aspects of the relationship between humankind and nature. The subject of my inaugural lecture was the inevitable trade-off between quality and sustainability. The history of Easter Island seemed to be a possible opening gambit, so I reread Ponting and studied several more recent publications with approximately the same message, including an article by the biologist Jared Diamond (the prelude to his later book *Collapse*) and a detailed study by Paul Bahn and John Flenley, two professional Easter Island researchers, whose book compared the developments on Easter Island to the Club of Rome's computer-generated model of the future of planet Earth in the twenty-first century.⁴ The similarities were remarkable: both models showed dwindling resources, increased pollution and strong population growth for as long as it was sustainable; this was followed by a sharp drop, over the course of only a few decades, in the number of inhabitants, and this decline in population clearly heralded the disintegration of society. This is the collapse theory in a nutshell, and Bahn and Flenley took the history of Easter Island to be solid proof of it. What struck me most was the fact that they placed the island's steep decline in the period between 1680 and 1750. The first Europeans, Dutchmen sailing under the command of Jacob Roggeveen, arrived in 1722 – in other words, in the middle of the alleged collapse. This concurred with Ponting's theory, but I wondered whether the Dutch explorers had recorded similar findings in their journals. I set out in search of their accounts.

I was in luck. A rare copy of Roggeveen's journal, published only in 1838, had been donated to the university library by the geographer A. van Deursen.⁵ Less than half an hour after asking myself whether it even existed, I was sitting in my office reading Roggeveen's original journal: *Dagverhaal der ontdekkings-reis* (Journal of the Voyage of Exploration) (Figure 1.1).

To my surprise, there was almost nothing in the journal to corroborate or flesh out Ponting's story. In fact, the Dutchmen encountered a healthy population, saw no weapons and even traded linen for chickens and bananas. Roggeveen concluded his account with the observation that the land was not 'sandy, but, on the contrary, exceptionally fertile, producing bananas, potatoes, sugarcane of considerable thickness, and many other fruits of the earth'. The island could have been 'turned into an earthly paradise' if only its inhabitants had been willing to cultivate the land properly, but

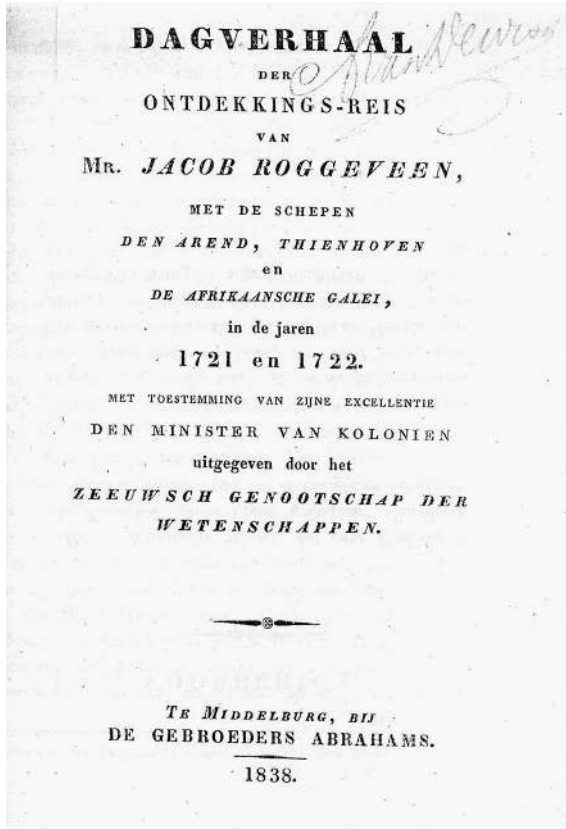


FIGURE 1.1. Cover of *Dagverhaal der ontdekkings-reis* by Jacob Roggeveen, Middelburg, 1838.

they did so merely to the extent necessary for subsistence.⁶ Roggeveen had been used to very different ideas about working the land in his native province of Zeeland, where grain and cattle had been traded since the late Middle Ages.

How could these reports be reconciled with accounts of the sudden collapse of civilizations? A seed of doubt had taken root, and new questions began to sprout in my mind. What started out as an opening gambit had grown into an exciting quest. Were Roggeveen's findings wrong? His visit to the island had been short, to be sure: he and his men had spent only one day on shore, and had kept to the coast. What had other members of his expedition reported? What about the accounts of European explorers who visited the island after Roggeveen? The Spanish, English and

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French expeditions admittedly arrived decades after the Dutch, yet still in the eighteenth century. I decided to study their journals, too, for the sake of comparison. They proved to be more numerous than expected, for in addition to the commanders' official logbooks, there were the journals kept by the crew members and scientists on board. Even though these accounts vary in their reliability and degree of detail, they are extremely informative and well worth reading, if only because their observations shed light not only on the island's culture but, implicitly, on their own societies too. Through their journals, we come to know the first European visitors to Easter Island as Dutch traders who thought a place uninteresting if it lacked profitable opportunities for trade. The Spanish emerge as fervent Catholics with true missionary zeal: before departing, they erected three large crosses on the island. The globally minded English made it clear that the island was too insignificant to be part of the British Empire, while the French remained true to the spirit of the Enlightenment by surveying the island and reflecting on its form of governance.

I gradually became more knowledgeable about Easter Island and, by reading between the lines, also learned a great deal about the visitors' cultures. But none of these sources contained any support for the collapse theory, nor any evidence of a decline caused by famine and high mortality. I wondered whether Ponting had actually read Roggeveen's account. The previously quoted passage betrays extraordinary sloppiness: he calls the ship the *Arena* instead of the *Arend* (Eagle), and he states that Roggeveen explored the island on Easter Sunday, whereas he only sighted it that day, and it was not until a couple of days later that the landing party finally ventured ashore. And what about Ponting's description of widespread misery? That information could not have come from the journal. I sent Ponting an email, asking him about his sources. He replied that he had taken most of his information from J. D. Jennings's book on the prehistory of Polynesia, which contains a chapter on Easter Island.⁷ That chapter, written by Patrick McCoy, did indeed paint a bleaker picture of the island's pre-European history than the journals did, but I found McCoy unconvincing as a witness to the drama Ponting had described.

Could Ponting possibly be wrong? After all, ten years had passed since he had formulated his theory. Could confirmation of the collapse be found in the publication (from which Ponting quoted) by the anthropologist Alfred Métraux, who had worked on Easter Island in the 1930s?⁸ Or had Ponting neglected to mention some of his sources? He had no doubt read – perhaps already in elementary school, as I had – the exciting books by Thor Heyerdahl (see Figure 1.2).⁹ But where else could I look? By this time,



FIGURE 1.2. The Kon-Tiki expedition led by Thor Heyerdahl. Courtesy of the Kon-Tiki Museum.

the subject had taken hold of me. I was becoming a familiar figure at the library as my research gained momentum.

After several months of study, I was convinced that in this case the collapse theory did not hold water, certainly not the version of it championed by Ponting and Diamond, by now so well known that it features in textbooks on environmental science.¹⁰ I certainly had enough material for a lecture, but there were still a lot of loose ends to tie up.¹¹ Certain questions arose with increasing insistence. What had actually happened? Had Easter Island experienced one cataclysmic event or merely a series of gradual changes? Could its history be reconstructed? What was the significance of the hundreds of large statues (*moai*) erected along the coast? Why had this practice been discontinued, and what explains the subsequent emergence of a birdman cult? How did the island fare after the eighteenth century? It was clear to me that the story of Easter Island was in need of a sequel, since the fascination for this island and its history has never waned. The lecture ballooned into the present book, in which I reconstruct and

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describe the ecological and cultural history of the island. In doing so, I have concentrated on the written sources, but I have also studied artefacts, spoken to many scientists, and travelled to Easter Island, where I interviewed numerous inhabitants and examined the situation firsthand.

This book focuses on humankind's relationship to nature and on the question of how sustainability and quality relate to both nature and culture in Easter Island's pre-European society. What did the first visitors actually see of that society? And do their observations substantiate the findings of later scientific research? I soon discovered that the literature on Easter Island had grown out of all proportion in recent decades, so I decided to highlight only the main contours of its nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. My research has shown that if indeed Easter Island can be said to have experienced a collapse, it did not occur until the nineteenth century and for reasons completely different from those hitherto put forward. This raises important questions. Did the islanders rediscover their Polynesian culture after that dramatic event, and did they succeed in rebuilding any of it? Have they been able to preserve their hard-won – or newly acquired – character under the Chilean authorities that have governed the island since 1888? The question of identity resurfaces continually: since the air strip was built with American support in 1967, modern tourism has been more in evidence every day. Fifty years ago, the lack of a cash economy meant that sailors were forced to trade cigarettes for woodcarvings and fleeting affairs, whereas now there are serious proposals to build a casino and a prison.

Finally, there is the question of whether the history of that tiny but iconic island in the vast ocean holds any meaning for planet Earth, an island in the cosmos. In the eyes of Ponting, Diamond and many others, Easter Island is 'a grim warning': if we behave imprudently and continue to deplete our natural resources, we earthlings can expect a collapse similar to that experienced by the Easter Islanders, who, after all, brought their suffering upon themselves. But does Easter Island have another story to tell? Is its history less a cautionary tale than a story of cultural resilience? What, in fact, are the lessons to be learned from the vicissitudes of this enigmatic island?

CHAPTER 2

From the East or the West?

The Dutch

The Dutch are credited with being the first Europeans to visit Easter Island. Although there are several reports of an earlier Spanish visit,¹ convincing proof of it has never been found. The Dutch, at any rate, were the first to give the island a non-Polynesian name and to describe it in their journals.

Travel accounts by five different authors describe the expedition led by Jacob Roggeveen. The complete titles are listed under ‘Easter Island, Early Accounts’ in the bibliography near the end of this book. Briefly, the five accounts are the following:

1. *Kort en nauwkeurig verhaal van de reize door drie schepen* (A Brief and Accurate Account of the Journey by Three Ships), Amsterdam, 1727; several editions, which differ in some respects, appeared that same year.
2. *Tweejaarige Reyze Rondom de Wereld* (Two-Year Voyage Around the World), Dordrecht, 1728; later editions appeared in 1758 and 1787.
3. Carl Friedrich Behrens’s *Reise nach den unbekandten Süd-Ländern* (Voyage to the unknown South Lands) of 1728 is a rhyming account; a later version, recast in prose by the same author, was published as *Der wohlversuchte Süd-Länder* (On the Well-Sought South Lands) in Leipzig in 1737; the latter account appeared in the eighteenth century in Dutch, French and English translations. In 1732, Behrens also published *Nader onderzoek door Karel Fredrik Behrens: En bericht van zyne reyze*

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naar de Zuid-Landen gedaan (Closer Examination by Karel Fredrik Behrens: An Account of His Voyage to the South Lands), a slender volume addressed to the Dutch East India Company (VOC), arguing in favour of continuing the quest for the 'great southern continent'.

4. *Scheepsjournaal, gehouden op het schip Tienhoven* (Ship's Log, Kept on the Ship *Thienhoven*), the journal of Cornelis Bouman, published in Middelburg in 1911.
5. *Dagverhaal der ontdekkings-reis van Mr. Jacob Roggeveen* (Journal of the Voyage of Discovery of Mr. Jacob Roggeveen), published in Middelburg in 1838 and republished in an annotated edition in 1911.

Journals 1 and 2 are anonymous. The writer of 1, who did not journey to Easter Island himself but got his story from an eyewitness, is known to have had the initials T. d. H. This is probably the Mr De Haze who is named in an epilogue at the end of the journal by a certain Werner Köhne (W. K.). The anonymous writer of the *Tweejarige reyze* (Two-Year Voyage) did not undertake the journey either. Carl Friedrich Behrens's rhyming account of 1728 and his prose version of 1732 have not yet been studied or edited. The former, which was discovered by Roelof van Gelder in the Regensburg University Library, is now available digitally; a copy of the latter is kept in the Leiden University Library.²

The journal of Roelof Roosendaal, captain of the *Africaansche Galeij*, was presumably lost when his ship sank. The journal of Jan Coster, captain of the *Arend*, and that of first mate Jacob van Groenveld, which are mentioned explicitly in the documents of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), have never surfaced. When the Dutch East India Company (VOC) seized Roggeveen's ships in Batavia, the journals of Coster, Bouman and Roggeveen were handed over after days of difficult negotiations. Transcriptions of them were made for the VOC chamber in Middelburg, and Roggeveen kept his own journal or a copy of it, which was sold at auction in Middelburg in 1788. In 1836, another copy of Roggeveen's journal surfaced in Middelburg; the various hands bear witness to its transcription by four VOC officials in Batavia. This copy, now in the National Archives in The Hague, served as the basis of the printed edition of 1838.

The members of the Spanish, English and French expeditions could have had access to the accounts (or translations of them) described under numbers 1, 2 and 3, which later proved not to be the most reliable sources. It is unlikely that copies of Roggeveen's and Bouman's journals were in circulation in the eighteenth century.

(continued)

Bouman's account was discovered in 1905 in the family archive of the Rotterdam businessman D. Hudig, a distant relative of the VOC captain of the ship on which Bouman returned to the Netherlands, which might explain the provenance of the journal. This copy (which might actually be the original manuscript) formed the basis of the printed version, which did not appear until 1911, together with an official reprint of Roggeveen's journal. These volumes were edited by F. E. Baron Mulert and published by the Linschoten Society.

The discovery that the island was inhabited provoked a host of questions. Where had these people come from, the Dutchmen wondered, and how had they managed to reach this far-off island? At the time, the members of the expedition were unaware that this was the most remote inhabited island in the world, a fact that only gradually became known. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Pacific was still an ocean that Europeans had barely sailed, let alone charted. Mariners explored the South Pacific in hopes of finding the long-sought southern continent.³ The Dutch geographer Arent Roggeveen (father of the future explorer) was determined to prove its existence, and in 1676 he obtained permission from the States General (the national assembly) to organize an expedition for this purpose. Although the WIC did not object to his plan, nothing ever came of it. Not only did Roggeveen fail to raise the necessary funds, but his health deteriorated. The permission expired, and Arent Roggeveen died in 1679 before he could embark on his adventure. His son Jacob had no desire to travel, despite two periods of service in the Dutch East Indies, the second as a member of the Court of Justice, the highest legal body of the VOC in Asia. After returning to the Netherlands in 1714, he established a respected law practice in Middelburg, but was subsequently embroiled in religious disputes which became so heated that he was banished from the city. This might be one reason why, at the age of sixty-two, he set out to make his father's dream come true. In 1721, he petitioned the *Heren X*, the governing board of the WIC, and was given its authorization to go in search of that 'unknown southern continent', *Terra Australis Incognita*, present-day Australia. The preparations proceeded with unexpected smoothness and speed.⁴

In July 1721, he set sail from the island of Texel with three ships: the *Arend*, the *Thienhoven* and the *Africaansche Galeij* (see Figure 2.1).⁵ To give a wide berth to the territory of the VOC, the ships sailed via South America. The western side of this continent belonged to the commercial territory of the WIC; the expansion of that territory to include the 'great South Land'