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Delaune, Gregory

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Rapa Nui on the Verge: Easter Island's Struggles with Integration and Globalization in the Information Age

By Gregory Delaune, AICP

Abstract

Rapa Nui (Easter Island, Chile), though previously shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding, has emerged as a global focus for indigenous land rights, thanks largely to increased global awareness made possible via internet-enabled social media platforms. Beginning centuries ago with the arrival of the first human settlers on the shores of this island paradise, the adverse consequences of human ingenuity, overpopulation, and globalization have pushed the island's ecosystem beyond its carrying capacity, leading to cycles of environmental and sociocultural development and collapse. As a global microcosm, this cycle holds valuable lessons for how the rest of the world can sustainably manage environmental, cultural, and economic resources. Applying modern tools and techniques, the inhabitants of Rapa Nui now hold the promise of achieving an environmentally sustainable lifestyle while maintaining their cultural and economic autonomy.

Keywords: sustainable development; island; globalization; information technology; cultural heritage preservation

Introduction

Rapa Nui, popularly known as Easter Island, Chile, has been shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding for centuries. Similar to places like Stonehenge and Machu Picchu, the island is a source of fascination that spawns fantastic theories regarding the basic facts surrounding its archeological treasures and anthropological development, as well as the historical events impacting the lives of its modern people. However, the struggles faced by the indigenous culture of Rapa Nui are largely unknown.

In his 2005 book, *Collapse*, Jared Diamond draws renewed attention to the island, theorizing about the historical reasons behind the rise and eventual fall of the highly developed society that once inhabited it (Diamond 2005). Since Diamond completed his work, internet accessibility and information technology (IT) platforms have helped raise global awareness about the mix of contemporary economic, environmental, and social issues that

impact modern Rapa Nui, demonstrating the potential for the island to play a new and important role on the world stage. In general, rapid access to historical data, as well as the instantaneous global exchange of news and information, have resulted in unprecedented information transparency, casting new focus on the internal legal, cultural, and environmental struggles of communities previously shielded from the rest of the world, either by physical isolation or information regulation by regional and/or federal governments.

During August of 2010, equipped with these IT resources, the Eco-Polis International Master's Program in sustainability and local economic development—in which I participated as an instructor and researcher—worked onsite with the Rapa Nui people as part of a cooperative project for generating innovative planning strategies that could address the island's development issues as they relate to its effective carrying capacity. As a result of this and similar cooperative projects, and through the global information exchange that makes them possible, the Rapa Nui people have gained a voice, a face, and a sense of solidarity with other indigenous peoples locked in the struggle to find their place in a global society.

In many ways, Rapa Nui is a microcosm of our world. From its rise as a complex society capable of executing the breathtaking monumental Moai sculptures for which it is most famous, to its decline into societal breakdown and environmental degradation, the history of the island is a cautionary tale of how shortsightedness and overdevelopment can doom the most innovative and industrious societies.



Figure 1: Eco-Polis researchers visit Ahu Tongariki. Photo by Gregory Delaune.

The historical development and decline of Rapa Nui's first great society holds one set of lessons about sustainability. Now we have the opportunity to see how the modern paradigms of economic development and environmental management impact an indigenous people's struggle to retain its identity and autonomy, while still playing its role as a free and participatory society in the global community. Furthermore, similar to the events surrounding other movements by oppressed or indigenous peoples, we can see how the use of the internet in the form of videos, blogs, and email has had an increasingly profound effect on how the political conflicts that shape modern Rapa Nui are perceived throughout the world. What we once saw only as an exotic tourist destination where the mysteries of an ancient civilization could be explored, modern information exchange now allows us to understand as another complex political situation where an indigenous people facing the realities of modern development is fighting to reclaim its cultural heritage and autonomy. Like many struggles of this kind, it is helpful to understand the issues as part of three interrelated themes: sociocultural conflicts, economic development goals, and environmental quality.

Rapa Nui Culture: Rapid Rise, Rapid Fall, and Current State

No written records exist, but historians generally agree that Rapa Nui was first settled by Polynesians in seafaring canoes and catamarans sometime between the 9th and 12th centuries. On their arrival, what the first inhabitants found was 64 square miles of island paradise, replete with towering palm forests, a rich mix of flora and fauna, and abundant sources of food and building materials (Hunt 2011). Sometime between the 12th and 16th centuries, development on the island reached its zenith, with a population of approximately 15,000 (West 2008, p. 684). It was during this time that most of the more than 900 Moai statues that are scattered across the island were created. Precise details of this period are not known, both due to the lack of a written language and the extreme cultural dislocation that accompanied the island society's eventual collapse. What is certain is that by the time the first westerners reached the island, on Easter Sunday, 1722, the island was already a barren and windswept shadow of its former glory, with a population that had disintegrated to between 2,000 and 3,000 (West 2008, p. 684).

In *Collapse*, Diamond argues that the island went through an environmental implosion that was triggered by over-harvesting of its palm forests, unsustainable agricultural practices, species extinctions caused by over-hunting, and poor access to trading partners (Diamond 2005). While Diamond's explanations for the environmental collapse are sometimes disputed, historians generally agree that along with environmental

collapse came a societal breakdown that included clan warfare and even cannibalism. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the island continued to experience internal warfare which led to the eventual toppling of all of the Moai statues. During the 1860s and 1870s, more frequent contact with outsiders resulted in additional cycles of depopulation, caused by slaving raids and disease carried by traders and missionaries. The population reached an all-time low of 111 in 1877 (Diamond 2005, p. 112). From that point on the population started to grow again, but continued exploitation and domination by outsiders left the islanders confined to a limited area around the capital, Hanga Roa, while the rest of the island was reserved exclusively for sheep grazing. Through this process of disconnection from their hereditary clan lands, forced reeducation by missionaries and government officials, and rapid decline in the use of the Rapa Nui language, much of the islanders' cultural heritage was lost (Fischer 2006). Confinement in Hanga Roa continued until 1960, when the Chilean navy finally reopened the island to its native residents.

In *Easter Island Land Law*, Maria Pereyra-Uhrle chronicles the complex and often questionable legality of the agreements made on behalf of the island's indigenous population (Pereyra-Uhrle 2005). Foremost among these is the 1888 deed of succession that annexed the island to Chile, and remains a primary point of dispute with local leaders. Rapa Nui's turbulent past, combined with increased exposure to progressive interpretations of indigenous land rights, eventually led to the beginnings of a local initiative for independence. The first notable movement was started by Alfonso Rapu Haoa, who was part of the first cohort of Rapa Nui school children to be educated in mainland Chile and who returned to the island in 1964 to become a school teacher (McCall 2003). Although his subsequent election as mayor of the island initially triggered a crackdown by the Chilean navy, his leadership in the independence movement led to the navy's eventual withdrawal from the island and the reforms granted under Law 16.441 of 1966, known as the Easter Island Law (Fischer 2006). This law not only established the Municipal Government of Easter Island Province, but also created a system of public services, including a court, police office, and bank, and granted the inhabitants citizenship rights, including the right to vote (Pereyra-Uhrle 2005).

In 1983, Alberto Hotu Chavez organized the first modern Council of Elders, uniting the clans around the preparation of a petition to the United Nations Committee on Decolonization, as part of a referendum for independence. Mr. Hotu remained an active community leader throughout the 1980s and was eventually elected Mayor of the Municipality in 1992. Chile's indigenous People Law of 1993 was another important step in recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples all over the country, although indigenous leaders were divided on the definitions and provisions of the law (Pereyra-

Uhrle 2005). The internet now provides increased access to extensive and reliable information about the complex history of laws and treaties that are part of the ongoing struggle of indigenous peoples everywhere. This access is improving awareness and making it easier for the Rapa Nui to band together with their global partners to organize and mobilize their efforts for achieving their common goals.

In August of 2010, the independence movement adopted more aggressive and high profile tactics, including occupying the site of the Hangaroa Eco Village and Spa, which is located on land expropriated under the 1966 Easter Island Law that provided for public services. The Hito Rangi Clan claims that the land was illegally sold to private developers during the period of the Pinochet military dictatorship. Eco-Polis researchers and project consultants were on the island in the midst of these protests and occupations, speaking with local leaders and witnessing the ongoing struggle of the local population to find a unified voice to communicate their struggle to the rest of the world. Since then, a series of protests and violent retaliations by the Chilean federal government have continued to bring the conflicts surrounding the independence movement to the attention of human rights groups and other supporters from around the world (NewsLook 2011, Warren 2011).



Figure 2: September 15th – 16th, 2010: As Chile celebrated its bicentennial anniversary of independence from Spain, indigenous Rapa Nui occupied the Hanga Roa civic plaza protesting the 1888 annexation of the island. Chilean war ships were anchored off the island in anticipation of unrest and offloaded federal police to disperse protesters on the morning of September 16th. Photos by Gregory Delaune.

Sociocultural Conflicts

Rapa Nui's turbulent cultural history, fragile environment, and geographic isolation make it an ideal case study for examining sustainable development issues, like those studied by the Eco-Polis research group. To generate its 2010 final strategy document, Eco-Polis researchers worked with key local community stakeholders onsite, visiting important cultural sites and consulting local planning documents to gain an understanding of the sociocultural, economic, and environmental conflicts that have shaped

Rapa Nui's history. Internet access on the island not only allowed the project team to reference online data sources about the island, but it also facilitated research of global best practices that could be adopted for use on Rapa Nui, and has continued to provide transparent access to the project findings and strategies for the local population.



Figure 3: Mayor Luz Zasso Paoa discusses environmental, economic development and social issues with Eco-Polis researchers. Photo by Gregory Delaune.

In 2011, demonstrations and open conflict between the Chilean federal government and groups representing the clans of Rapa Nui continued, as they had in past years. These conflicts were based on the claim by the indigenous clans (and the international groups that support them) that the Chilean government has illegally occupied the island, seizing and privatizing land to reap lucrative profits from the island's cultural heritage treasures. Local clan leaders refuse to recognize the municipal authority set up by the Chilean Federal Government, on the grounds that the treaties and agreements that justify its hold on the island are illegal, and were signed by individuals who were not authorized representatives of the entire community (Douglas 2011).

For their part, the current owners of disputed properties claim they have inherited legal rights to develop and manage the island as best they can, promoting the tourism industry and trying to protect the island from overdevelopment. Eco-Polis researchers witnessed firsthand how the battle lines of this conflict sometimes cut directly through individual clan

families. In many cases, individuals who gather together on a regular basis for family or clan events have diametrically opposed positions with regard to how the island should be governed. For example, the current mayor of Rapa Nui, Luz Zasso Paoa, is the niece of one of the key leaders of the independence movement, Madam Piru. Paoa explains how this reality puts the federally established, locally elected, municipal government in the precarious position of trying to balance the policies of the Chilean government with a range of emotionally charged demands on the part of local clan leaders that, in some cases, are practically impossible to satisfy.

Land claim conflicts have created sociocultural rifts within the native population. A particularly complex issue in this regard, and a primary source of the violent conflicts we see in the media, involves the historical claims of the Hito Rangi clan on the lands in and around the urbanized capital, Hanga Roa. During the period beginning in 1888, when most of the island was leased to the Williamson-Balfour Company for use as a sheep ranch, the indigenous population of the island was confined to Hanga Roa, fenced off from the rest of the island. In 1966, the Rapa Nui were given Chilean citizenship and the entire island was once again opened for settlement, theoretically allowing the clans to return to their historical lands in other parts of the island (Fischer 2006). In reality, almost the entire population of the island has remained in and around Hanga Roa City. As a result, the Hito Rangi clan's historical claim over the area has continued to be superseded by contemporary land ownership and subdivision mechanisms, which not only puts them in conflict with the federal government, but also with other Rapa Nui clans who claim land ownership in Hanga Roa. These kinds of land disputes in Hanga Roa are common among all the Rapa Nui people, and by no means limited to the Hito Rangi clan.

Another sociocultural issue is the loss of cultural heritage. The permanent population of the island has now risen to just over 5,000 and has been growing steadily over the last decade. Approximately half of the population claims full or partial Rapa Nui lineage, which means that they are descended from the 36 individuals who survived to reproduce after the historical 1877 population low of 111. This depopulation of the island, combined with practically no written record of historical facts, or even the indigenous language, has made it difficult for the Rapa Nui to reclaim their cultural heritage. Even the word for "hello" in Rapa Nui has had to be appropriated from other Polynesian languages, because the original word was lost in the cycle of occupation and cultural devastation. Most of the Chilean immigrants who make their living in the tourism industry have little or no connection to the Rapa Nui culture. In fact, many are ex-convicts fleeing their past, or opportunists with no interest in the preservation of the history or culture of the island. The number of tourists who visit

the island has swelled to over 70,000 annually, and continues to grow, drastically increasing foreign cultural influence on the local population and threatening to extinguish what little remains of the indigenous way of life.

Interviews with local citizens and clan leaders by Eco-Polis researchers revealed how this cultural dislocation has contributed to the indigenous population's feeling of helplessness and frustration with regard to maintaining control over their cultural destiny. The locally established Rapa Nui Parliament, based on the clan structure, is part of an independence movement that seeks to unite the Polynesian populations of New Zealand, Hawaii, Tahiti, and Fiji, expelling mainland "invaders" and establishing a sovereign nation based on their common cultural heritage and the sharing of resources. These dreams of independence are seen as unrealistic by people like Sergio Rapu, an archaeologist and former governor of the island (The Economist, 2009). The movement is predicated on the assumption that the existing power structures of these islands will step aside, and is indicative of the emotion and diversity of interests that underlie the independence movement. With no clear resolution to these complex issues, for now there is no end in sight to the conflicts that they continue to generate.

Economic Development Goals

Practically speaking, Rapa Nui has a stable economy with little or no unemployment. Compared to other parts of Chile, its inhabitants enjoy a relatively high standard of living, due primarily to the endless flow of income from global tourism. The tourism industry not only dominates the local economy, but also generates tremendous amounts of revenue for the Chilean government. International interest in the Moai statues has also exposed the tiny island to some of the more damaging impacts of globalization, creating a need to protect and manage access to the precious archeological treasures that have earned the island its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The stakes are high, and there is no reason to think that the federal government is interested in handing over control of this lucrative resource to indigenous authorities. There is also little reason to believe that local grassroots organizations, like the clan-based Council of Elders, is capable of effectively dealing with the complexities of managing the island's network of national parks and archeological sites. Since the Moai are sacred ancestral monuments of the Rapa Nui people, the process of commercializing these resources has resulted in conflicts over who should control access to the sites. The Rapa Nui are justifiably frustrated that while their access to many of the sites is limited, visitors who have no appreciation of the history and meaning of the statues are free to treat the island like an amusement park. In some cases, these conflicts

are more about the division of the spoils than respect for the artifacts, but be that as it may, both sides feel justified in their position.

Inevitably, the economic development issues overlap with the sociocultural conflicts. The \$800-per-night Hangaroa Eco Village and Spa, on land claimed by the Hito Rangi clan, has become a focal point for the occupation activities and protests that have rocked the community and garnered international attention. In 2010, local leaders told Eco-Polis researchers that they are concerned about the population becoming a society of restaurant and hotel owners, tour guides, and service personnel, adapted to the mass market of international tourism. While many local artisans make a living producing and selling handicrafts, such as miniature carvings of the Moai in wood and stone, the industry is threatened by foreign production and the arrival of mainland artisans. Furthermore, local authorities have been unable to establish legal control over branding of the island, so that anybody in the world can use the island and its iconic Moai for marketing purposes without paying royalties. One notable example of this is the Tres Erres distillery, based in Santiago de Chile, that makes a commemorative bottle of Pisco liquor in the shape of a Moai statue.

As part of their 2010 economic development study, Eco-Polis researchers looked at issues related to the carrying capacity of the island. A community satisfaction study indicated that the local population generally supports tourism and the revenue it brings, but that they also feel that it is reaching (or has already reached) a tipping point at which the number of visitors should be limited (Lanzoni & Sardo 2011, p. 92). Researchers identified ways of limiting tourism and minimizing its negative impacts while using it as an economic engine to diversify the economy and protect the island's unique cultural heritage resources. Growing global attention combined with international cooperation projects like this offer hope that enlightened policies and guidelines for achieving sustainable development on the island can be implemented before it reaches another tipping point towards societal breakdown.

Environmental Quality

As Jared Diamond chronicled in *Collapse*, the history of Rapa Nui is the classic tale of a society that grew past the point where the available natural resources could support the established lifestyle and sustenance needs of the population. The resulting collapse left in its wake an environmentally devastated landscape, completely deforested and incapable of supporting even a fraction of its peak population. Destruction of seed stocks by rodents and later use of the island for raising sheep helped ensure that the palm forests and balanced ecosystem that once dominated the island would never recover (Wynter 2011).

Rapa Nui is 2,280 miles from the Chilean mainland. This isolation makes modern waste management a critical issue. Tremendous amounts of goods are imported to support the population of residents and tourists. To exacerbate waste management issues, the discovery of Dengue fever, carried by mosquitoes that lay their eggs in garbage, resulted in the Chilean government's refusal to accept waste shipments from the island to the mainland. Poorly managed landfills now dot the island with little or no municipal control. Aside from being an eyesore, they are a danger to public health and are putting the island's single monolithic aquifer at risk of contamination (Lanzoni & Sardo 2011, p. 61). On the coast, plastic water jugs, glow sticks, and other debris continuously wash ashore, collecting on the rocks and in the tidal pools. Much of this is refuse jettisoned from fleets of Spanish and Japanese fishing boats, whose illegal commercial fishing has reduced tuna population to dangerously low levels, contributing to local shortages and (ironically) forcing islanders to import tuna from other parts of the world (American Albacore Tuna Association 2011).



Figure 4: Local indigenous leader, Madam Piru, tours the coastal areas littered with garbage originating from the industrial fishing fleets that operate near Rapa Nui. Photo by Gregory Delaune.

Like economic development, these environmental quality issues have sociocultural impacts. Local cultural heritage and clan identities are tied to sense of place. Local clan leaders explained to Eco-Polis researchers that the self image of the Rapa Nui is intricately linked to the quality of their environment, their ability to live off the land, and the preservation of their sacred archeological sites. Tragically, some of the activities that are undermining environmental quality are the result of activities by local clan members; for example, poor management of the island's sanitary landfills (Lanzoni & Sardo 2011, p. 64). Be that as it may, it is fair to say that the general cause of these conflicts is the lack of a common vision among stakeholders for how to sustainably manage the impacts of development and tourism activities. In the mean time, overdevelopment is once again pushing the island beyond its carrying capacity and threatening to send it towards another environmental collapse.

The Re-Emergence of Local Pride and an International Identity

While Rapa Nui is facing difficult issues related to globalization, there is also cause for hope. Madam Piru, who worked directly with the Eco-Polis research group during its tenure on the island, is a local clan leader who has traveled all over the world as a representative of Rapa Nui. Piru is a respected local leader, an active grassroots activist, and an environmental specialist who has a sophisticated approach to integrating the various issues faced by the indigenous people. Working with the local youth, she has established a mobile encampment that moves along the coastline to collect debris that washes ashore, while she teaches them about the rich and sometimes turbulent history of their ancestors, and discusses the importance of managing the opportunities and risk that globalization brings. Her efforts are reawakening a sense of cultural pride and environmental stewardship. Role models like Piru are offering a new generation of Rapa Nui alternatives for how to take control of their own destiny while protecting the future of their cultural identity.

Just as the internet and social media platforms helped publicize the events related to the Arab Spring, the internet has provided new tools for the Rapa Nui to share their struggles with the rest of the world, creating dialogue and galvanizing support within the global community. Now people from around the world, whether they have a direct tie to the island or not, can follow the progress of the Hanga Roa land disputes, monitor Chilean authorities' response to demonstrators seeking a peaceful resolution to land disputes, and get the facts about the progress of the independence movement. Increased internet access on the island is helping the local population connect to international aid groups, researcher institutions, and

advocates that can help them balance their place in the global community with their desire to maintain their cultural autonomy. Access to online databases about Polynesian languages, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data on the Maori, environmental management techniques, and best practices from other parts of the world for dealing with the issues that face the Rapa Nui are engaging the local community in a global dialogue about sustainability and local development practices. With limited time and resources, access to these data sources and online forums made it possible for the Eco-Polis research group to maximize its research effectiveness and efficiency before, during, and after their tenure on the island. Policy recommendations and pilot project proposals remain online as a resource for the local population, and Eco-Polis researchers remain in email contact with representatives from the municipal and federal government. The availability of reliable and detailed information about the island is also giving the rest of the world the chance to understand and appreciate the history, culture, and contemporary issues that form the complex mosaic of modern Rapa Nui.

The world is watching Rapa Nui. The challenges it faces are formidable, and the stakes for the indigenous population are high. Since the day that this island paradise was first settled by humans, outside influences and technical ingenuity have contributed to a cycle of development and collapse. Now, improved access to information and enlightened implementation of modern tools and techniques have the capacity to help the island become a global reference point for effective management of limited resources. The unique conditions on the island, and its high profile within the global community of indigenous peoples make an excellent context for pilot projects related to energy independence, waste management, environmental protection, and cultural heritage preservation. Like the rest of the world, however, local decision makers will need to be careful about balancing innovative social policy with strategic selection of new technologies that are appropriate for the local challenges. Improved communication and increased transparency will help facilitate this informed decision making, while also helping realize benefits for the rest of the world. Monitoring and global dissemination of data about the island's progress will expand opportunities for critical analysis and strategic adaptation of the lessons learned in other contexts. If this isolated community can return from the brink of cultural extinction to establish a modern way of life that is environmentally, economically, and culturally sustainable, perhaps there is hope for us all.

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Greg Delaune is an urban planner and sustainable development specialist with fifteen years of international experience consulting, teaching, and managing applied research efforts to help communities achieve their sustainability goals. From 2007 to 2011 he was a contract professor and curriculum coordinator with the Eco-Polis International Master in sustainability and local economic development. Currently, he lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he has founded the ForeFront Creative Solutions Laboratory to identify and help develop the latest green economy technologies and techniques for implementing sustainable development projects, policy, and strategies.