



Learning from the Past

eChapter 12

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In his best-selling book, [Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed](#), Professor Jared compares several societies to determine the role of environmental factors.

The author defines a framework for considering the collapse of a society, consisting of **five sets of factors** that include environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, loss of trading partners, and society's responses to its environmental problems and to other problems.

Among the failed societies cited in the book are: [Easter Island](#) (which collapsed because of deforestation), the Polynesians on [Pitcairn Island](#) (environmental damage and loss of trading partners), the [Anasazi](#) of the Southwestern U.S.A. (environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors), the [Maya](#) of pre-Columbian Central America (environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors), and the [Norse](#) colonies in [Greenland](#) (environmental damage, loss of trading partners, climate change, hostile neighbors and unwillingness to learn from Inuit natives).

In *Collapse*, Professor Diamond also discusses successes:

- Japan's [Tokugawa](#) period (1603 to 1867), when deforestation was reversed and trees were planted.
- The Polynesians of the tiny Pacific island of [Tikopia](#), who solved problems that doomed similar islands.
- The people of the central highlands of [New Guinea](#), who have lived off the land for 40,000 years.

Our fate on Earth is based, in part, on what we learn from the past. Environmental damage must be abated, climate change minimized, hostility among neighbors abandoned as wasteful and too expensive, trading partners must address the environmental components of trade, and people everywhere must develop wiser responses to our worsening environmental problems.