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## PROFOUND LESSONS FROM EASTER ISLAND

By J. Morris Hicks

It's extremely important that we all learn from what happened there and that we make sure that history doesn't repeat itself on the finite space where we all live today--planet Earth. So what happened on Easter Island?



A small island (About 63 square miles) located 2300 miles off the coast of Chile in the South Pacific, the human settlers (Rapa Nui) are believed to have arrived by boat from Polynesia around 400 A.D. That's when they began to take charge of this tropical paradise that it took Mother Nature billions of years to build.

During the next one thousand years, the Rapa Nui's population exploded to around 15,000, and evidence of a fairly advanced civilization can be found there today. From the size, weight and complexity of the giant stone statues that they built and placed around the island, we know that the Rapa Nui were most certainly an intelligent and industrious group of people with a sophisticated hierarchy of leadership. (Almost 900 of those giant statues, called Moai, were found—some weighing as much as 80 tons.)

But that thriving civilization was doomed, collapsing prior to the arrival of Dutch explorers on Easter Sunday (hence, the name of the island) in 1722. That's when they found only about 2,000 remaining humans—all of them just trying to stay alive. They were the last victims of a thriving civilization that collapsed due to its inability to connect their own behavior to the demise of the ecosystem that sustained them.

Prior to the arrival of the Rapa Nui around 400 A.D., the island had been almost completely wooded with palm trees and was home to thousands of species of birds and insects. Almost all of them went extinct during the first 1,000 years of human occupation. And the humans were well on their way to becoming extinct when the Dutch arrived.

It all started with deforestation as thousands of trees were cut to make room for settlements and to provide wood for boats (needed for fishing) and shelters for the people. Without knowing the results of their folly, the Rapa Nui were depleting the island's finite resources, which led to the demise of the fragile ecosystem that sustained life there. Before they knew what was happening, it was too late.

Tragically, that's exactly what's happening today on our *Easter Island*, planet Earth. And once again, deforestation is

a big part of it. Averaging thirty million acres of rainforest destroyed per year since 1970, we're destroying the "lungs of the Earth" in the process. Richard Oppenlander reported in *Comfortably Unaware* that a staggering 70% of that rainforest loss was for the raising of livestock.

When I talk about Easter Island in my presentations, I begin with two slides. The first shows a lush tropical island that it took nature billions of years to create. The second one shows how it looked after just one thousand years of human stewardship--a barren landscape. Consider this: If the four billion years of life on Earth were crammed into just one year, the human occupation of Easter Island lasted just the last ten seconds of that year--a mere blink in the eye of history.

Once again, we humans are systematically taking over a much larger amount of limited space--the entire globe. We are rapidly using up our finite resources to feed ourselves and to produce a steadily increasing amount of stuff for us to consume. And, it's not just the rainforest that's in jeopardy. It's our water supply, the biodiversity of our ecosystem, the quality of our air and more.

From a January 2015 *Washington Post* article entitled, "Human activity has pushed Earth beyond planetary boundaries."

"At the rate things are going, the Earth in the coming decades could cease to be a "safe operating space" for human beings. That is the conclusion of a new paper published Thursday in the journal *Science* by 18 researchers trying to gauge the breaking points in the natural world."

The paper contends that we have already crossed four *planetary boundaries*: the extinction rate, deforestation, the

level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the flow of nitrogen and phosphorous (used on land as fertilizer) into the ocean.

As I read the article, I was reminded of a terrifying factoid mentioned in the 2009 PPR-produced documentary, HOME: “We humans have inflicted more damage on the fragile harmony of nature in just the last fifty years than all previous generations of humans combined for the 200,000 years since we emerged as a species.”

*To put that in perspective, fifty years would be just the last one-half second of the imaginary year (of life on Earth) mentioned earlier.*

And although the depletion of our finite resources continues to worsen, none of our global leaders are talking about this terrifying “big picture,” much less organizing emergency initiatives to reverse this deadly trend while we still have time. Unfortunately, our top leaders are frequently quoted as saying that life has never been better than it is now: fewer epidemics, less infant death, more wealth, better quality of life, etc.

Sadly, that’s probably what the Rapa Nui were saying as they passed critical tipping points with regards to their own fragile ecosystem. But we still have hope. And we have the knowledge and the resources to turn that hope into reality.

Taking urgent action now with our food choices can buy us the time we need to address other human activities that threaten our ecosystem, our civilization and our long-term viability as a species. It is the easiest, quickest and most powerful step we can take to start restoring our ecosystem.