The Allegory of Easter Island Conceals Past Exploitation

Professor Thomas Hockey, Department of Earth Science
University of Northern Iowa – Quest for Racial Equity Project

In the unpublished essay written after his visit to Easter Island, Professor Thomas Hockey argues that the problem with the famous ecological myth of Te Pito te Henua is that the story all too easily shifts the blame for the demise of the Rapanui culture onto the Rapanui themselves. This way of life did not commit suicide; it was murdered. There may well be an environmental lesson to be learned on Easter Island. However, Hockey contends that there also is one of racial injustice.

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<th>Perception</th>
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<td>Long ago in the year 1860, the Rapanui culture was on a rapid population decline. How they got to that point is a myth that has been told in the West ever since. As the myth goes, there were people of the Rapanui culture living on Easter Island, an island in the Pacific. Running out of resources such as food and trees, the culture was on the brink of being gone forever...</td>
<td>...However according to a theory proposed by Thomas Hockey, maybe this wasn’t self-inflicted extinction at all. The difference between the Rapanui and any other cultures is the Rapanui people were kicked when they were down. They were enslaved and beaten, for some to the point of death. Rather than the demise being on the Rapanui themselves, the demise of their culture is on the ones who took it from them when they were at their weakest.</td>
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The most remote civilization on Earth belongs to the Rapanui. They inhabit a vertex of the Polynesian triangle, christened by the European navigators who bumped into it, Easter Island. There is an oft-repeated, modern parable about this place. Traveling to the island myself, I realized that the story is at best a myth—at worst, a lie.

Easter Island. The phrase conjures the exotic. A world of stone-faced giants less than the area of Cedar Falls. However, there also remains on this volcanic seamount a living and breathing aboriginal populace, comprised of individuals making the most of their lives 1,850 kilometers from anybody else.
What in the West we are taught goes like this: Once upon a time, it was these people who wrought an ecological disaster, within the exceptionally finite bounds of the known, physical universe, which—ironically—resulted in the extinction of their culture. You have heard it—the people who cut down the last tree and then supposedly wondered: Where did the forest go? It appears in writing and film. The tale well suited the growing international ecology movement during the 1970s, a time when the existence of Easter Island only just was entering the American collective consciousness. Te Pito te Henua (its indigenous name) became a metaphor for the possible future, global state of affairs.

Like all myths, this one contains certain truths. The Rapanui likely did alter the islet ecosystem severely, reducing its biodiversity, and ultimately affecting their own population. Nonetheless, we must distinguish between population and culture. All living creatures, from bacteria, to lemmings, to people, undergo fluctuations in local populations. The Rapanui population might have increased again—we never will know.

The Rapanui culture also did change in response to ecological events. Yet customs regularly evolve. A larger society practicing ancestor veneration (moai “statue” building) versus a smaller one based on a fertility cult (the not-as-famous, but equally enigmatic Birdman tradition) . . . who is to say what was the Rapanui culture? Both equally were so.

The original Rapanui culture died in the 1860s, a time within the memory of contemporary Easter Islander’s great-grandparents. During that decade, ninety percent of the Rapanui natives were killed: They worked to death as slaves, succumbed to introduced diseases, or simply were executed. This loss included virtually all the priestly and leader classes, those who guarded the corporate Rapanui memory. Survivors interbred with foreigners, not always of their own free will.

A population can withstand even a ninety-percent mortality rate. There are Rapanui today. However, a culture cannot. The Polynesian cultural affectations we may see on what now is claimed as Chile’s “Isla de Pascua” were not transmitted seamlessly, from generation to generation, back into the mists of time. Rather than merely perpetuating a heritage, today’s Rapanui face the more daunting task of resurrecting one. They must learn about their history’s particular Polynesian lifestyle, not from kin, but from books!

The problem with the Easter Island myth is that it all too easily shifts the blame for the demise of their culture onto the Rapanui themselves. The Rapanui way of life did not commit suicide; it was murdered. There may well be an environmental lesson to be learned on Easter Island. I contend that there also is a moral one.