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# Human Impact On Ancient Environments



## Synopsis

Threats to biodiversity, food shortages, urban sprawl . . . lessons for environmental problems that confront us today may well be found in the past. The archaeological record contains hundreds of situations in which societies developed long-term sustainable relationships with their environmentsâ and thousands in which the relationships were destructive. Charles Redman demonstrates that much can be learned from an improved understanding of peoples who, through seemingly rational decisions, degraded their environments and threatened their own survival. By discussing archaeological case studies from around the worldâ from the deforestation of the Mayan lowlands to soil erosion in ancient Greece to the almost total depletion of resources on Easter Islandâ Redman reveals the long-range coevolution of culture and environment and clearly shows the impact that ancient peoples had on their world. These case studies focus on four themes: habitat transformation and animal extinctions, agricultural practices, urban growth, and the forces that accompany complex society. They show that humankind's commitment to agriculture has had cultural consequences that have conditioned our perception of the environment and reveal that societies before European contact did not necessarily live the utopian existences that have been popularly supposed. Whereas most books on this topic tend to treat human societies as mere reactors to environmental stimuli, Redman's volume shows them to be active participants in complex and evolving ecological relationships. *Human Impact on Ancient Environments* demonstrates how archaeological research can provide unique insights into the nature of human stewardship of the Earth and can permanently alter the way we think about humans and the environment.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The primary value of this small book is its breadth. Even where it skips from one idea to another with only light documentation, the reader is forced to reflect. This provides a salutary mental workout that brings a new awareness of historical ecology. Redman's presentation is engaging and rarely categorical; he frequently lets the reader choose among alternative interpretations. . . . Human Impact on Ancient Environments should be required reading for undergraduates of any persuasion and will interest anyone who is concerned about the environmental problems that confront us today." &#151;Science

"This is an archaeologist's book, but it will be of considerable use to historians and their students. For the most part, Redman shows considerable good sense, correctly identifies the major issues, and places his assertions within the context of current anthropological debate." &#151;Environmental History

"Approachable and concisely constructed . . . As an overview text, it provides an important piece in the emerging picture of how our species has repeatedly squandered natural resources and how we are continuing to do so." &#151;SAS Bulletin

Threats to biodiversity, food shortages, urban sprawl . . . lessons for environmental problems that confront us today may well be found in the past. The archaeological record contains hundreds of situations in which societies developed long-term sustainable relationships with their environments--and thousands in which the relationships were destructive. Charles Redman demonstrates that much can be learned from an improved understanding of peoples who, through seemingly rational decisions, degraded their environments and threatened their own survival. By discussing archaeological case studies from around the world--from the deforestation of the Mayan lowlands to soil erosion in ancient Greece to the almost total depletion of resources on Easter Island--Redman reveals the long-range coevolution of culture and environment and clearly shows the impact that ancient peoples had on their world. These case studies focus on four themes: habitat transformation and animal extinctions, agricultural practices, urban growth, and the forces that accompany complex society. They show that humankind's commitment to agriculture has had cultural consequences that have conditioned our perception of the environment and reveal that societies before European contact did not necessarily live the utopian existences that have been popularly supposed. Whereas most books on this topic tend to treat human societies as mere reactors to environmental stimuli, Redman's volume shows them to be active participants in complex and evolving ecological relationships. "Human Impact on Ancient Environments"

demonstrates how archaeological research can provide unique insights into the nature of human stewardship of the Earth and can permanently alter the way we think about humans and the environment.

Dr. Redman, an archaeologist with anthropological and historical expertise, doesn't care about myth or political correctness. He simply, factually, and with precision demonstrates that man - for better or worse - has been impacting his environment since the days he hopped off the glacier and wanted dinner. The idea of the "green" primitive people, the noble savages in commune with nature, is broken down. Redman demonstrates that humans have used whatever technologies were available to them to manipulate their environment, usually for short term gains and at the expense of long-term environmental quality. But not always. He also lists examples in which various cultures have managed to strike some sort of equilibrium with their environments, at last for periods of time up to a thousand years or more. Dr. Redman is optimistic about the future, but sounds important warnings for complex societies, including ours. This is a must-read for anyone concerned about environmental issues and involved with environmental policy. And that should be all of us.

Redman rocks.

got it for a class, but very interesting

Nothing particularly exciting. It came quicker than expected and in the specified condition. It's a textbook, so there isn't really anything else to say about it.

Of the 25 books I've read in the past year this is the one that will have the most lasting impact. The dominant media factions would have us believe that all native people before European contact lived in pristine eco-edens ruled by peaceful matriarchies, with no toll taken on their habitat. Guess again! Hundreds developed sustainable relationships...but thousands were horribly destructive. "Humans have had a role in transforming virtually every environment and locale on this earth"-(fact) no matter which continent they inhabited. If we as a species don't learn from our mistakes of the past...we'd better find another planet to relocate to.

Redman makes a very good point in this novel that should be realized by all, and makes it clear that going back to the new-age hyped "natural" way of living that humanity possessed before contact with

the evil Europeans means breaking apart important characteristics of human nature (though he does show that such a way of living is possible and has been done). Yet the amount of time he takes to make his point clear, and the amount of needless background information he includes, makes this book a very tedious read. I recommend this book only to those who have a deep and motivating curiosity about humanity's impact on the world. (Tree huggers, this is a book for you)

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