
The Issue Of Population Decline On The Easter Island

In the 1600s, the people of Easter Island experienced a steep population decline. This event has been an object of much speculation by scientists and laypeople alike, and has spawned dozens of theories; people have guessed everything from alien influence to slavery to a plague to a combination of things. For decades, scientists mostly thought it was because the people used so much of the island's natural resources. Before 2006, the leading theory that around 800 C.E. give or take a few hundred years- a small group of settlers, most likely Polynesian, arrived on Easter Island. At some point, there was a population peak of around 20,000 people. They used minimal resources and their lifestyles were compatible with the environment.

Around 1200, they started using more and more resources, such as the trees. There is much speculation about why this occurred, but most think it was to build boats to transport the rock for the Maui heads. That much destruction can only lead to disaster. The island was increasingly losing its ability to support life, and the people started to starve.

By the time Europeans arrived in around the 18th century, Easter Island was reduced to a population of around 3000 suffering people, on a sandy, practically uninhabitable wasteland.

The latest plausible theory on this says all of that is completely incorrect, beginning to end. There was a study conducted by Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo in late 2006 that did radiocarbon dating of ancient soil on Easter Island. The results put the date of the settlers arriving on the island at around 1200; centuries later than we thought. This finding implies that they didn't have centuries of peace first, nor did they have time to get the population anywhere near 20,000. People getting on that island is what destroyed it from the get-go.

That being said, there might not have been a mass population collapse at all. Another possibility is that the island was never really able to hold over 3-5 thousand people at all. Additionally, Hunt and Lipo don't believe that whatever did happen, was necessarily the fault of the Polynesian settlers, but the Europeans. Or rather, their rats. They took the Polynesian settlers as slaves, and they also brought over rats (and subsequently, disease) on their boats. Rats having no predators, they bred incredibly quick and ate all the palm seeds on the island (and everything else.) In fact, Lipo believes that the story of the settlers destroying themselves may be just the fear-mongering stories of 20th century missionaries, and that we can't just assume that the terrible things we are doing to the environment now, we also did in the past.

As such, I believe that, assuming that there was a large population drop, it's unlikely that it could happen again. I think that the rat theory is the most plausible. If that is what happened, it couldn't really happen on a large piece of land, like North America, or even Australia or Greenland. There are too many resources, and we have technology that can wipe out vermin. It would be a possibility on a small, remote island.