

# Reading/Discussion Questions

*Collapse* by Jared Diamond

## Math/Music: Aesthetic Links

### Prologue:

1. Who was Ozymandias and how does the quote “Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!” from Shelley’s famous poem relate to Diamond’s argument? How does Shelley’s poem set the tone for the book?
2. What is the major controversy Diamond identifies as pertinent to any understanding of the ecological collapses of past civilizations? What opinions do you have regarding this controversy?
3. What are the five main factors Diamond identifies as possible causes for collapse? It is useful to keep these in mind when reading about each society.

### Part One:

4. How did Montana go from being one of the richest states in the US to one of the poorest? What environmental factors and damage helped lead to this decline? Which environmental problems discussed by Diamond surprised you the most? Which problems angered you the most?
5. The presumed conflict between environmentalism and business is an important issue to understand when studying environmental problems. What do you think about the quote on the bottom of page 37? Why does the author of the quote distinguish between accountants or attorneys and clergy members?
6. Chapter one ends with four stories shared by current Montana residents. Did any of these stories resonate with you? Which did you find the most compelling and which the most disturbing?

### Part Two:

7. Concerning the complete and utterly devastating effects of deforestation on Easter Island, what do you think Easter Islanders were thinking when the final trees were felled? Why and how do you think all the trees came to be destroyed?
8. What traits do the collapses of Easter Island and the Maya have in common?
9. What type of investigative technique did you find the most impressive in Part Two?
10. Which example of a past civilization to collapse do you find most compelling and why? Which best fits Diamond’s thesis? Which image or passage in Part Two made the most powerful impression on you?

### Part Three:

11. On page 312, Diamond distinguishes between exponential population growth and arithmetic food production growth. What is the mathematical difference between exponential and arithmetic growth? Where did we see this in the course last semester? Why is this distinction so important to Diamond's argument here?
12. On pp. 326-327, when discussing the Rwandan genocide, Diamond contrasts "explanations" with "excuses." What do you think of this distinction? Are there any recent events that you think this could apply to? According to Diamond, what were the main factors behind the Rwandan genocide?
13. On page 376, Diamond writes that our world "cannot sustain China and other Third World countries and current First World countries all operating at First World levels." Yet, can we ethically deny Third World countries the comforts and advantages that we in the First World enjoy? In your opinion, what should our leaders do to lessen or resolve looming conflicts over resources between First and Third World countries?
14. Which of Diamond's examples of modern societies do you find most compelling and why? Which best fits Diamond's thesis? Which image or passage in Part Three made the most powerful impression on you?

### Part Four:

15. Do you agree or disagree with Diamond's environmental concerns for the world? Does he overstate the seriousness of these issues? Do you find him to be overly pessimistic about our chances for solving these problems?
16. What emotions did you experience during and after reading *Collapse*? Did you come away depressed, angry, inspired, cautiously hopeful, or did you have an entirely different reaction?
17. One of the main goals of *Collapse* is to draw parallels between past and present societies, in an attempt to learn from previous mistakes and head off possible future collapses. Diamond argues that the mistakes and blindness and bad luck that led to past collapses can and will happen again, and that many problems in the world today arise because we don't do things differently. Do you agree with Diamond's basic premise that the past and present are closely connected, or do you think there is an essential ingredient that distinguishes us (the modern world) from previous civilizations, thereby weakening Diamond's cause for concern?
18. If the United States *were* to collapse, how do you think it will happen? What would it look like? Which of Diamond's five factors defined at the outset of the book would play a major role in the demise of the U.S.? Are there additional factors that could be relevant? Would the collapse occur suddenly, as with the society on Easter Island or Maya civilization, or would it be a gradual and stable decline, such as with Great Britain after World War II? Which ancient and/or modern societies should we look to as examples to avoid or cases to admire? Explain.

19. Part of the mission of Holy Cross is to foster a community which engages in fundamental questions such as “What are our obligations to one another?” and “What is our special responsibility to the world’s poor and powerless?” With that in mind, what personal obligation or responsibility, if any, do you have to address the challenges posed in Diamond’s work, particularly those raised in the final chapters? Are there particular strengths, experiences or talents you possess that would be helpful in confronting some of these issues? Has this book forced you to consider any changes in your future educational or vocational path? Do you feel a new (or renewed) obligation to “serve” after reading this book? Are there any courses, fields or travel you would like to pursue during your Holy Cross education related to these issues?