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Math Across Culture

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The Power of Awareness

In “Collapse,” Jared Diamond describes the problems that affect the survival of societies and how they either survive or fail based on their reactions. Societies’ ignorance of their environmental damage and their inability to solve their environmental problems contributed to their failures. Unlike past failed societies, our current society obtains the essential knowledge and power to prevent environmental damage; yet our society’s irresponsible business competitions resemble the competitions of collapsed societies. However, the rise social awareness by members of society and corporate responsibility for the environment are powerful resources that can change the selfish motivations of leaders. Although our society resembles the characteristics of collapsed societies, informed members of society can collectively influence the environmental actions of powerful business leaders.

Past societies’ lack of knowledge to sustain their environment and to prevent environmental problems lead to their gradual demise. Diamond defines the unrecognized gradual deterioration as “Creeping Normalcy” because the standard that represents normal shifts gradually and imperceptibly (Diamond 425). Collapsed societies such as those on Easter Island and the Mayans experienced this slow gradual decline of resources which obstructed accurate reflection on their complete environmental damage. The lack of written language or other relevant records explains why societies fail to understand and learn from the consequences of their. The Mayans, who only processed written records about astrological events and king’ deeds, were unprepared to survive a drought in the 9th century even though their civilization experienced a similar drought in the 3rd century (Diamond 422). Likewise, new generations of Easter Islanders were unaware that their society’s actions caused the extinction of the giant palm and the land birds (Diamond 106). Without records to compare the current environment to the past, eastern islanders lacked knowledge to sustain their resources. Consequently, they continued to repeat the same irresponsible actions until they ultimately exhausted all their natural resources. Their ignorance prevented themselves from knowing the full extent of their environmental impact.

Just like the gradual collapse of past societies, our global society’s resources continue to slowly decline despite the abundance of knowledge. Information is readily available in our society contrary to past societies, yet we do not always consume resources at responsible levels. Within the logging industry, loggers have developed methods to minimize negative environmental impact so that the rate of tree re-growth equals the rate of tree removal (Diamond 469). However, logging companies continue to decimate forests without considering the long term environmental effects on the region. Similarly, seafood companies continue to overfish depleted seafood that has caused certain fish to become nearly extinct (480). Despite the shared knowledge to manage the fishing industry and maintain a sustainable supply of fish, companies continue to exploit the weak supply. Even with our knowledge of the consequences of excessive consumption, our global society ignores the environmental impact in favor of cheap quick resources. Our society’s actions resemble the careless actions of past failed societies because we ignore our impact on the environment. Even with the proper information given to businesses they choose their own selfish benefit instead of social benefit.

Similar to past societies, our current global society remains oblivious to the gradual environmental changes that cause significant long-term damages. The effects of global warming have caused the world temperature to slowly increase over time at an increasing rate of degree per year (Diamond 425). According to Diamond, the effects of “creeping normalcy” are exemplified by the melting of Montana’s glaciers and snowfields (426). Diamond spent his summers in Montana as a teenager, but when he revisited Montana as an adult he discover the snowless mountains. Locals adjusted to the gradual decrease in snow and the new standard of normal, even though drastic changes had occurred within a matter of 50 years. Therefore even with technology and information, our society fails to notice the gradual changes in our environment that contribute to the collapse of past societies.

Unlike our current societies, past collapsed societies relied on false religious beliefs to make decisions, which accelerated their consumption of resources. Diamond writes that the Easter’s leaders claimed relationship to the gods, which explains how chiefs successfully motivated commoners to construct statues (109). The influence of religion ignited a competition between rival chiefs of different territories to erect larger statues. The construction of these monuments added about 25% to the food requirements of Easter’s population and required a large amount of thick long ropes made from tree barks (Diamond 102). Unlike the Easter islanders, unjustified religious beliefs do not influence our current society to waste massive amount of resources.

Although religion influenced past societies, the competitive mentality for wealth and power also motivated leaders of the past. Similar to the competitive construction of statues on Easter islands, the ancient Mayan leaders competed against one another to construct extravagant temples. Mayans leaders received power and luxuries for promising rain and prosperity (Diamond 170). Therefore the luxurious lifestyle and competitive drive of Mayan King of Copan could have easily disconnected himself from the sufferings of overpopulations and the fighting over limited food that plagued his people. He could have overlooked the problems and ignored potential solutions for his people because of the competition to build temples and acquire wealth. According to Diamond, the effects of degradation combined with unusually severe droughts caused social unrest which lead to the collapse of kingship (172). The competition between the Mayan and Easter Island leaders caused them to ignore their society’s environmental concerns in order to succeed.

Our current global society resembles the characteristics of past collapsed societies because of our competitive nature for wealth and power even with our abundance of information. Diamond compares the excessive monuments of the Mayan Kings and Easter Chiefs to the conspicuous consumption by modern American CEOs (177). As a capitalist society, the motivation of American companies focuses on maximizing profit rather than ensuring social benefit. Some companies ignore their environmental responsibilities because environmental preservation cuts into a company’s profits. Mining companies ignore pollution and responsible cleanup of a site because it is too expensive (Diamond 457). Loggers sign short-term leases on forest land, so they can ignore long term consequences (Diamond 469). The seafood companies will maximize their own profit even if that means overfishing (Diamond 480). Therefore companies and their leaders are motivated by immediate short-term profit rather than sustaining an environment that preserves resources for future generations. Leaders rationalize their behavior that damages the environment in order to outperform their competition. This competitive mentality to earn wealth by outperforming rival companies resembles the motivation of Mayans and Easter Islanders, who constructed monuments that exhaust their resources in order to gain riches.

Although the competition and wealth influences our society, the emergence of social awareness and social power provides optimism that our society will correct the environmental mistakes that caused ancient societies to collapse. The availability of information on the internet and cable has given members of society, consumers, a greater awareness about environmental issues. According to Diamond, 80% of consumers claim they would prefer to buy environmentally safe wood if given the choice (475). As the demand for environmentally conscious products has increased, councils such as the Forest Stewardship Council and the Marine stewardship Council seek to provide credible environmental certifications to products (Diamond 481). Consumer awareness for environmentally safe products influences the decisions of companies to produce their products. Company leaders, who have in the past sacrificed the environment like Eastern and Mayan religious leaders, risk lower profits if they choose to sacrifice the environment for cheaper resources. Therefore social awareness and knowledge influences competitive companies to provide products that meet new environmental certifications. This development gives our global society hope to avoid the mistakes of collapsed societies.

The availability of information within our society has led to greater corporate accountability to take responsibility for their environmental actions and to preserve the environment. According to Diamond, companies like Chevron assume additional costs to protect the environment around their drill site. Chevron justifies their sacrifice in profit to conserve the natural surroundings because the cost to clean up pollution in an environmental disaster exceeds the price to originally prevent pollution (Diamond 447). Therefore competitive companies can reduce their environmental pollution to ensure their future profits despite the corporate competition for cheap resources. Information about the consequences of pollution has forced companies to become accountable for their environmental danger. The cost of an environmental disaster provides economic motivation to preserve the environment which gives hope to avoid a collapse reminiscent of past societies.

For our society to prevent a collapse, both individuals and companies must make sacrifices to act more moderately, to reduce unnecessary excessive consumption. As a wealthy and successful consumer society, we have become accustom to living lavish lifestyles. Our society is not concerned about our survival, but instead about trivial goods we want rather than essential goods we need. Similar to the statue production of Easter Islanders the mentality to produce and consume frivolous goods that are not vital to our society’s survival has accelerated the depletion of our resources. As consumers we value goods that make us happy in the short run, rather than considering the long term implications of our consumption. Our society needs to sacrifice our consumer values to prevent the depletion of our critical resources. Companies must choose environmentally-friendly options to produce goods even if the cost increases. Likewise, consumers must also choose environmentally-friendly options to consume despite the more expensive price tag. Together the combined sacrifices of companies and individuals will prevent the collapse of our global society.

Although our global society resembles societies that have exhausted their resources, members of our society have the influence and information to manipulate the behavior of powerful leaders and prevent an environmental collapse. The declines of past societies were ignorant that their competitions lead to their environmental collapse. Even with knowledge, businesses in our society continue to operate at unsustainable levels that repeat the mistakes of the past. Yet the rise of social awareness and social accountability offer optimism even as companies remain competitive to provide vital resources.