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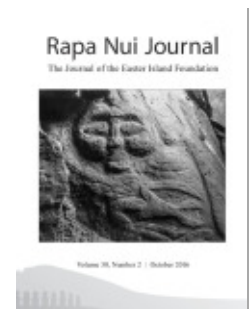
*The Survival of Easter Island—Dwindling Resources and
Cultural Resilience* by Jan J. Boersema (review)

Anette Kühlem

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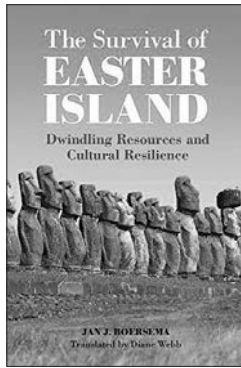
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Boersema, Jan J. *The Survival of Easter Island – Dwindling Resources and Cultural Resilience*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 308 pp. ISBN 9781107027701. US\$102 (hardcover). Available from www.cambridge.org

Review by Anette Kühlem,
German Archaeological Institute

The Survival of Easter Island – Dwindling Resources and Cultural Resilience by Jan J. Boersema is a must-read for anyone with a serious interest in the cultural and environmental history of Rapa Nui. Jan J. Boersema, who is Professor of Principles of Environmental Sciences at Leiden University, is known to have been a critic of the wildly popular “collapse theory” for many years and presents here an impressive body of work once and for all disproving it. At the same time, he is trying to find other plausible explanations for what really happened on Easter Island and why. Unlike the authors who were made famous for propagating the alleged scenario of ecocide and the resulting societal breakdown on Easter Island, Boersema includes a comprehensive array of scientific evidence from a wide range of disciplines in his work. Most significantly he gives due importance to the available historical accounts with their descriptions of the situation on Easter Island at the dawn of contact with the outside world that have – incredibly – been ignored for so long.

Apart from the meticulous evaluation of the state-of-the-art of many fields of Easter Island research, this book offers an impressive bibliography and reminds us of the importance of doing serious scientific research and evaluating the available data rather than constructing a house of cards that doesn’t hold up to hard facts.

More specifically, with respect to the last point, the author arrives at the conclusion that “the [collapse theory] proves to be a construction in which the facts have been exaggerated and mythicized and for which a chronology of events has been suggested that is at odds with reality. The conclusion is inescapable: the collapse theory [...] does not bear scrutiny.”

The slightly ironic language (in places) and the many comparisons of historical situations to our modern world make this book an amusing read without ever deflecting from the gravity and scientific impetus of its message.

The book is divided into nine chapters: In Chapter 1 the author describes his first exposure to the “collapse theory” and how doubts about it began to form when he realized that the ostensible collapse of Easter Island society falls in the time of the arrival of the first European eyewitnesses. Contrary to the pessimistic picture that was painted by the collapse advocates, the island was described to be “exceptionally fertile”, the inhabitants healthy. No signs of violence or even weapons were recorded. This gave reason for Boersema to systematically review all the available historical accounts about Easter Island. His conclusion was that “[...] none of these sources contained any support for the collapse theory [...]”. He then poses the question that he tries to answer in the following chapters: “What had actually happened?”

Chapter 2 gives a summary of the first European expeditions and their experiences on and descriptions of Rapa Nui. Further, it presents the many strands of evidence that confirm the Rapanui to be a Polynesian people who migrated across the Pacific from the West to the East.

The next chapter describes the environmental situation of Easter Island before the arrival of the Polynesian settlers and how the biodiversity decreased thereafter. The biggest factor was the almost complete deforestation that had many repercussions for the environment and the culture of the island.

In the fourth chapter, Boersema lays out the seven phases of occupation on Easter Island and the interactions of humans, the environment, and religion that define them. He describes how the transitions between the different phases were gradual and how the Rapanui found sustainable ways to adapt to the challenges of isolation, limited natural resources, and finally foreign influences.

Chapter 5 deals with the religion of the Rapanui and the again *gradual* change from the *moai*/ancestor cult to the birdman cult, showing that the history of Easter Island is one of continuity and adaptation rather than collapse and breakdown.

Chapter 6 turns to the concept of societal collapse and what it involves. The author describes when and how the “collapse theory” emerged and how Easter Island came to be the model for worldwide doom. This theory is at odds with the hard facts that have been produced by scientific research and the accounts of European explorers. Boersema shows how the estimates for population numbers have been exaggerated while the food production potential has been underestimated/mischaracterized, and points out how the collapse literature ignores the cultural adaptation and resilience of humankind.

Chapter 7 focuses on the impact of European contact with the island. It is characterized as a turning

point in the island's history, marked by the introduction of new organisms and micro-organisms and new cultural perspectives. It describes the devastating effects of the Peruvian slave raids and the introduction of smallpox that resulted in a dramatic depopulation and loss of knowledge about Rapanui culture. This marked the true collapse that happened due to foreign influence on the island.

In Chapter 8, Boersema describes the Christianization of the islanders and the effect of the first foreign residents on the island. He gives an account of the different researchers who came to study the Rapanui culture – or what was left of it – and eventually “[...] propelled Easter Island to iconic status in the field of environmental science.”

The last chapter deals with Rapa Nui's role as a model in environmental sciences and comes to the somewhat psychological question of why the “collapse theory” remained so popular despite all the evidence against it. The author gives examples for impoverishments of ecosystems that did not end in collapse, but in a reorganization. It is “[...] the quality of ecosystems [that] is at stake, not their sustainability.” He lists all the misconceptions that the “collapse theory” is based upon and comes to the conclusion that it misrepresents Easter Island's past and can therefore not be used as a lesson for the world's future. Instead the Rapanui found “[...] a new balance of culture and nature [...]” He ends with a portrayal of Rapa Nui today and a number of suggestions for the cultural and environmental sustainability of the island.

Throughout the book, Boersema lays out how the misconceptions about the pre-contact Rapanui culture could have been avoided – if objectiveness had ever been the objective – by reading the available historical accounts and by taking the results of scientific research into account. The story of Easter Island before contact is not one of failure but one of success. This book can convincingly prove that the population was able to adjust culturally and materially – albeit on an impoverished level – to an environment which had developed at least partly through factors over which the islanders had no control.

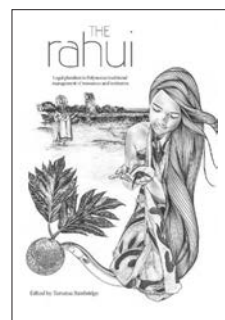
The psychological aspect that the author includes in the book as to why the idea of Easter Island as a model of worldwide disaster became so popular and was so uncritically repeated by many scholars is most interesting and adds a new perspective to the collapse controversy.

There are two minor points of criticism. Firstly, the term “coconut palm tree” as it is used throughout the book is misleading: While there is still so much uncertainty as to the taxonomic classification of the extinct Easter Island palm, it would be more judicious to refrain from using the term “coconut palm”. The

author seems to have had an actual coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) in mind, because he refers to the endocarps as possible containers for storing water (p. 52). The shells of the palm nuts found in excavations on the island don't hold more than 1oz of liquid and could hardly have been used for that purpose.

And secondly, in such a meticulously referenced book, it would be desirable to also give references for some of the dates (e.g., for the beginning and end of the statue production) to have a better idea of what his chronological framework is based upon.

In summary, Jan Boersema is to be commended for presenting such a conclusive body of evidence that may be seen as the final blow to the simplistic and once iconic “collapse theory” which, in fact, “[...] turned out to be “a textbook example of collective error” [...]” The book *The Survival of Easter Island – Dwindling Resources and Cultural Resilience* is a rehabilitation of the ancient Rapanui who have been characterized as being responsible for the demise of their island despite being the victims of foreign influences.



Bambridge, Tamatoa (Ed.).
The Rahui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories

Canberra: Australian National University Press, Pacific Series,

2016. 269 pp. ISBN 9781925022797. AUD\$38 (cloth), free download at press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/pacific-series/rahui

Review by Alex E. Morrison,
International Archaeological Research Institute, Inc.

The Rahui: Legal Pluralism in Polynesian Traditional Management of Resources and Territories is an important collection of twelve chapters edited by Tamatoa Bambridge. In the introduction Bambridge describes the *rahui*, an ancient institution in East Polynesia, as “a form of restricting access to resources and/or territories.” These twelve chapters, along with introductory and conclusion essays, offer extensive information regarding both traditional *rahui* and contemporary *rahui* across a geographical expanse ranging from the Cook Islands to the west, the Hawaiian Islands to the north, and Aotearoa (New Zealand) to the south. The collection is broadly organized in two sections. The first section focuses on the related