

# Preface

Relationships between societies and environments have spawned an extensive literature going back at least to Plato. Some fundamental concepts crop up repeatedly, yet individual societies have their idiosyncrasies in adapting to or in modifying their environments to meet their needs. Collateral damage is a constant accompaniment to our modifications. History shows that a relationship between society and landscape that proved successful in one era, may fail at a later time. Because of factors such as climate, economics, political and strategic conditions, to say nothing of pestilence, war and conquest, adaptation is a continuing process. Human history is punctuated by the continual need to adjust to fire, flood, earthquake, and volcanic eruption, to name only the most obvious. In fact, at this late stage in our history we do not so much as adapt to changing circumstances, as constantly readapt.

As societies evolve and enlarge they may reach the Malthusian limit of the human carrying capacity of the local landscape. In the past when the human population was small and there was lots of room we commonly escaped the problem by moving on. If we stayed put, the options were to increase our ecological footprint to bring in the resources of a wider area by trade, theft or war, the most highly organized form of theft. Alternatively, we have found technological solutions to the problem, though on a finite planet with our numbers still growing, we are forever looking for newer and better technological fixes. Society is always a work in progress.

The simplest societies, at least in theory, have the greatest adaptability. Societies that become increasingly stratified and custom-bound have a harder time. The more evolved a society, the greater its impact on the Earth. History is unequivocal, complex societies fail—whether by exhausting resources (soils most critically), fouling their nests with wastes, or simply by failing to adapt to change in a sustainable way. Rise, decline, sometimes rejuvenation, and fall is the pattern. Erstwhile successful societies have continually disappeared in history, only to be replaced by equally ephemeral ones. While the second law of thermodynamics remains un-repealed, no culture or civilization will last forever.

Consequently, this book presents the work of various scholars who were asked to describe and analyze their respective examples in a multidisciplinary way. Such analyses of the relationships between landscapes and societies at different times and in different places is useful not only in its intrinsic value in contributing to the history of *Homo sapiens*, but potentially in informing our present situation and helping us to recognize opportunities and risks in planning for a more sustainable future than we appear to be facing at present.

The various chapters examine changes in selected landscapes and societies from early Holocene times to the Present. In **Part I** we favor the Mediterranean centered area because in a relatively small area a great variety of landscapes have interacted with all manner of societies from simple nomadic and agrarian ones to the great civilizations of Egypt, Greece and Rome. The interaction has been so great and so prolonged that an entire natural biome has become anthropic. **Part II** contains analyses of societies from other parts of the globe. From Asia there are reports from the source of eastern civilizations, China, as well as Japan, and Sri Lanka. There is also together with a novel analysis of the effect of disease, particularly malaria, on the expansion of the human footprint into the Pacific. Central America provides the example of one of the great civilizations of the world, the Maya, which developed independently of the founding civilizations of the Old World, and met its demise as a result of environmental change, internecine conflict and finally invasion from Europe. From North America the extremely variable, harsh Arctic landscape capable of sustaining only relatively small number of people, comes the example of highly resilient Inuit communities dealing with one of the world's most extreme landscapes in the Arctic, as well as an examination of the modern technological civilization of the western USA, where societies survive for the present by transferring water across mountain chains. All these cases reveal the mutability of human societies and their dynamic, reciprocal relationship with changing landscapes.

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Selected Cases

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