



New study challenges theories on Easter Island collapse

Bishop Museum's Dr. Mulrooney conducted 6-year study on Rapa Nui

HONOLULU -

Bishop Museum's assistant anthropologist, Dr. Mara Mulrooney, conducted a six-year study on Rapa Nui, also known as Easter Island, about the island's theoretical civilization collapse.

Results from her groundbreaking doctoral dissertation entitled "Continuity or Collapse? Diachronic Settlement and Land Use in Hanga Ho'onu, Rapa Nui (Easter Island)" are outlined in an article published in the December issue of the Journal of Archaeological Science. This new evidence debunks previous theories that the islanders "self-destructed" before Europeans first visited in 1722.

As popularized in Jared Diamond's 2005 book Collapse, Rapa Nui is often viewed as a prime example of what happens when people lose sight of what they are doing to their environment.

According to the popular narrative, the Rapa Nui people committed "environmental suicide" by deforesting their island home. But, new evidence collected by Dr. Mulrooney and colleagues is challenging that story.

"The new picture that emerges from these results is really one of sustainability and continuity rather than collapse, which sheds new light on what we can really learn from Rapa Nui," said Mulrooney.

"Based on these new findings, perhaps Rapa Nui should be the poster-child of how human ingenuity can result in success, rather than failure."

Dr. Mulrooney analyzed over 300 radiocarbon dates from across the island, including 15 dates from new excavations in the northern area of the island. These new findings, along with the re-analysis of previously collected dates, showed that large tracts of Rapa Nui's interior continued to be used for agricultural production of foods like sweet potatoes and taro, even after European contact with the island. This directly challenges the previous belief that these areas were abandoned as the island chiefdom supposedly collapsed.

These results, together with recent results from Dr. Mulrooney's colleagues Thegn Ladefoged, Ph.D. (University of Auckland), Christopher Stevenson, Ph.D. (Virginia Commonwealth University), and Sonia Haoa (an archaeologist from Rapa Nui), who have been analyzing the ancient gardens of the island, suggest that the Rapa Nui people managed to transform their island home into a more productive and sustainable environment. These new findings suggest that it was not until the fatal impacts of European contact in the 18th century that Rapa Nui society experienced a real societal collapse due to introduced diseases.