Explaining the Sustainability of Ancient Easter Island

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Easter Island (Rapa Nui) has frequently been described as a classic case of societal collapse from over-population and reckless exploitation of the island’s fragile ecosystem. However, recent research has revealed that the prehistoric social-ecological system maintained a complex balance toward sustainability. Societal collapse came only with European contact and Old World epidemic diseases leading to a population crash. In this presentation, I examine the strategies that resulted in a highly resilient society that evolved under extreme conditions of isolation, a poverty of resources, and limited mobility. The Rapa Nui case offers a compelling case, albeit quite different than most have assumed.