



## The Story of Rapa Nui

Rapa Nui was created by volcanic activity. About 300 to 400 AD, Polynesian explorers are believed to have settled on Rapa Nui. They probably found a fertile, uninhabited island covered with dense palm tree forests, but limited to less than 50 other species of plants. There were a few species of insects, but the island lacked animals larger than the two species of lizards. The fresh water supply was limited to the lakes that formed in the craters of extinct volcanoes. The tiny island lacked coral reefs, so the surrounding ocean waters contained a very small number of fish species. Although the Polynesians had brought food crops with them, many of the food crops did not grow well. An adequate food supply was created from chicken, sweet potatoes, taro, and yams.



About 600 of these Moai, stone statues, were carved centuries ago and were thought to have been transported around the island of Rapa Nui by rolling them on logs.

The people of Rapa Nui developed into a technologically and socially advanced society. It is estimated that the island population eventually reached a maximum of about 10,000 people. Through human ingenuity the people of Rapa Nui were able to provide for their needs using the limited resources of the small island. They were able to grow and prepare food, make clothing, and build houses. Beyond the basic needs for survival, the society developed a rich culture and advanced technology that permitted the construction of huge temples and the massive statues called Moai.

The islanders had developed a sophisticated system of technology that allowed for unique religious customs and social practices on the island. Much of the technology used centered on the carving and relocation of the Moai. The Moai were carved from rock found in the island's stone quarry. Local legend indicates that the Moai "walked" to their final destinations. This leads researchers to believe that the islanders rolled the statues in an upright position on logs from the quarry and used a variety of tools along the way. These tools included manufactured ropes, pulleys, and lubricating oil.

The trees were cut into lumber for housing, wood for fires, and eventually for the rollers and levers used to move and erect the stone statues. With the loss of the forests, the land began to erode. Topsoil was washed into the sea and crops began to fail. The clans turned on one another in a battle for the scarce resources. The violence grew worse and worse. It was said that victors would eat their dead enemies to gain strength. Bones found on the island show evidence of this cannibalism. With the scarcity of food the cannibalism may have been an issue of starvation as well as ceremony.

When the Dutch explorers landed in 1722, the island's population had dwindled down to less than 600 people in three different tribes. These tribes waged constant war against each other. The culture had all but diminished. What was the cause of their demise? There were very few trees left on the island and resources had dwindled below sustainable levels. Even though the islanders had a sophisticated cultural and technological society, they were unable to sustain the balance between the needs of the people and the resources that were available from the environment.

Based on The story of Easter Island, Chapter 4: Conflict: The Fall of the Moai  
[http://mysteriousplaces.com/Easter\\_Island/html/tour4.html](http://mysteriousplaces.com/Easter_Island/html/tour4.html)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## *Rapa Nui Assignment:*

1. Draw a T-chart listing all of the resources the island provides in the first column. In the second column explain what happened to each resource as the population increased.

<u>RESOURCES</u>	<u>POPULATION'S AFFECT ON RESOURCES</u>

2. Answer the following questions:

a. What steps could the islanders have taken to help sustain life on Rapa Nui?

b. Describe ways that the island of Rapa Nui could be seen as a model for the Earth. In your description, address how the society of the ancient population on Rapa Nui compares and/or contrasts today's society.

c. What are some possible future actions people could consider in order to help sustain life?

d. What actions could push the Earth beyond its ability to sustain life?

