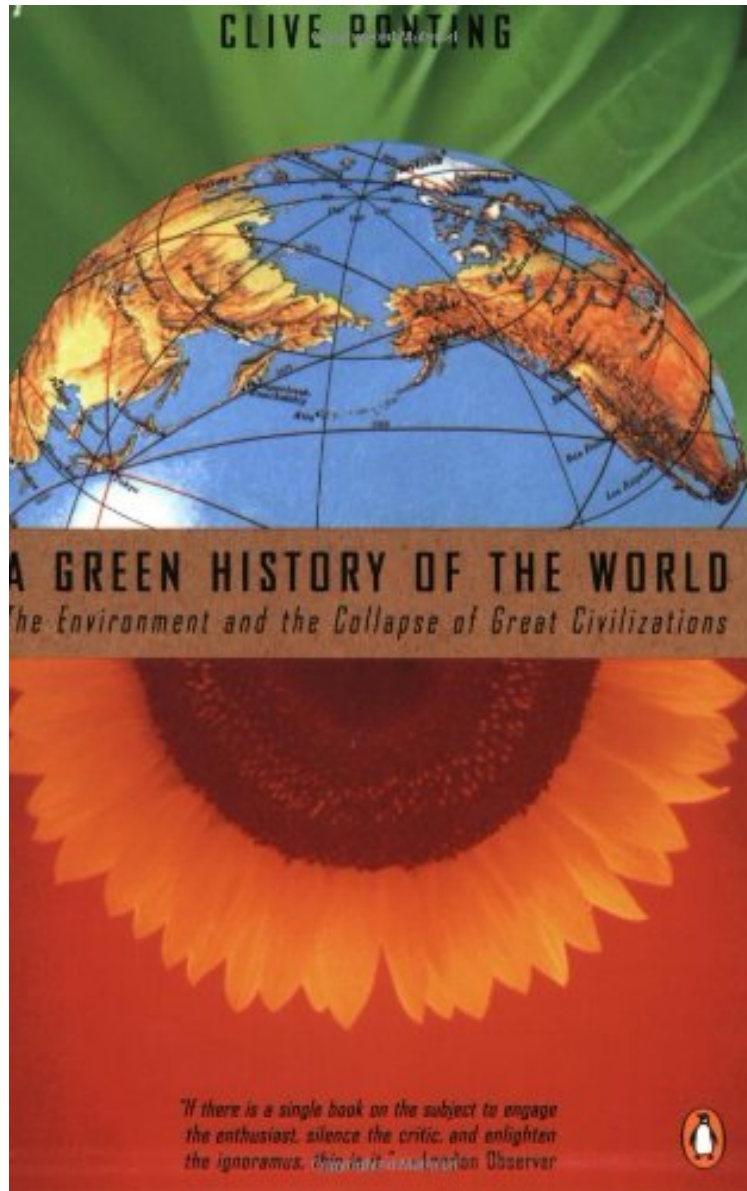


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# A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations

Clive Ponting

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Clive Ponting : A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations:

22 of 22 people found the following review helpful. Essential reading - but frustrating

By Richard Middleton

In an age of specialization, the author provides a much-needed (and brilliant) general overview of man's impact on the planet. It is hard to imagine anyone, after reading this book, seriously arguing that the western lifestyle (and especially the American lifestyle) can be sustained much longer. We may succeed in hanging on for a few more years (especially if we manage to keep developing countries from attaining our own living standards), but it seems unlikely that our nationalistic political systems will be able to agree and implement the necessary global solutions (whatever those may be - it is not clear that there are any) in time. This is an immensely valuable analysis, but I think that it is a 5-star topic hiding within a 3-star book. Let me give two reasons:

1. It is virtually impossible to substantiate his arguments without reading the extensive bibliography, a daunting task. For example, when he states that, in energy efficiency, "The United States is still 60 per cent less efficient than Italy and Japan", he needs a citation to support the statement. This applies throughout the book. My own writing has been concerned with global water and sanitation issues, and I know how easy it is to have a document which is more footnotes than text, but without references I cannot really make use of or defend any of his important statements.
2. As another reviewer has commented, the book needed a strong editor. I have not read the earlier (1991) version of this book, and so cannot make comparisons, but much of the book is so well written, and other parts so badly, that it feels as if the earlier version was very well edited, and then the updates were inserted on a word processor. The early chapters in particular have too many sentences with "and" linking ideas which need to be treated separately, and he is very sparing with punctuation which would have made the sense clearer. The acid test is reading the text aloud; often you will hesitate because you need to read to the end of the sentence before you can clearly identify its structure and subordinate clauses and hence the underlying ideas. A good editor would also have caught matters such as neutral pH being given as 6.5, the map accompanying the discussion on Sumer and its principal settlement, Uruk, omitting both names, and various typos. This may seem like nit-picking, but I had to struggle to get through the beginning of the book, and then was rewarded by the much higher quality later on. I certainly do not regret buying the book, which has given me a much broader understanding of our present problems and the way we got where we are (he is particularly strong on the impact of colonialism and its modern-day successors) - but if you want to engage in serious debate with proponents of "business as usual" you will need many more hard facts to make your case.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. An eye-opening perspective on world ecological crisis

By Hrvoje Butkovic

Awarding this book five stars has come as somewhat of a surprise to me. The text has a number of shortcomings that would ordinarily conspire to produce no more than a mediocre work. Somehow, in this instance, they instead play to each other's strengths to create a tome of rare quality, depth and relevance to our times. The first negative aspect that stood out for me was the book's dry academic tone. I felt like I was being pounded with figures and statistics until I couldn't take any more. A friend of mine reached the saturation point after only a few excerpts. We couldn't help but wonder how many people would persevere in slogging through the text to absorb the invaluable information that it contained. We suspected very few.

Secondly, despite the breadth of its scope - attempting to cover the environmental history of the world since prehistoric times - the book comes off as one-dimensional. It simply chronicles the impact on nature that various civilisations have made through the history. It doesn't try to present an overarching thesis that it can back up with this data, nor does it suggest ways in which the present ecological degradation can be reversed. Considering how thorough the book is at detailing the problems, lack of solutions is a sizeable omission. It is very difficult to walk away from this book thinking that our civilisation is anywhere but on the course to total collapse triggered by the breakdown of the biosphere that supports us. Ending on such a desolate note is all too likely to leave the reader feeling helplessly depressed over our inevitable self-destruction. Taken together, these shortcomings are surprisingly effective at accomplishing what I suspect were Ponting's aims. Presenting reams of data from all time periods and parts of the world places the current ecological problems in a larger context that cannot be acquired from reading about the problems themselves. This broadened perspective is critically important when considering potential solutions. That the book doesn't suggest what these might be feels reflexively disappointing, but I consider it a strength. One pattern that emerges from the book is human capacity for sticking our heads in the sand as the world burns and continuing with business as usual well past the point where corrective action was urgently needed. Expecting to be offered solutions is a part of that mentality. By being devastatingly clear about the nature and severity of the problems and offering no solutions, the book sends a clear message that it is up to us to put in the hard work of discovering what those solutions might be and implementing them. It also serves as a rude awakening from our dependency on happy endings. In this instance, there likely won't be one. This might be a bitter pill for some to swallow, but I believe a necessary one. I've come across far too many people who willingly refrain from looking at the facts right in front of them because they know full well that doing so would disturb the comforts of their daily lives. What we do need is comprehensive and credible information to base our analysis and decisions on. The book delivers it in spades. Its dry academic tone and focus on facts rather than rhetoric are real assets here. There's no need for Ponting to argue a thesis. The patterns from the data are so clear that the reader cannot help but become utterly concerned for the future of our world. Reading about yet another instance of human population growth outstripping its food supply, yet another way in which we pollute the earth, or yet another animal species that we have exterminated is painful, but imparts on the current environmental problems a sense of magnitude

that a mere polemic cannot give. It also puts to rest any thought of solving these problems through legislation or environmental activism. While these actions (suggested by Lester Brown in Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization, among other sources) are probably necessary to stem the tide of destruction, they cannot be sufficient because they don't address the fundamental factors that have given rise to these problems in the first place - our very outlook on the world and the way it causes us to treat it and each other. I cannot recommend this book as a pleasant reading experience, but I unreservedly recommend it as an eye-opening one. It comes at a high price in the reader's labour and nerves, but the clarity of vision with which it illuminates our environmental crisis is well worth it. (From the author of *A Glimpse of Another World and Living Deliberately*) 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. An assessment of our current world's effect on the natural ... By Nick Woodin An assessment of our current world's effect on the natural world and how we got there. Data driven and thorough. Sometimes pedestrian but I find the rational approach relaxing. Worth a slow and thorough read. A less academic Vaclav Smil. (But I find Smil's books admirable, even when I must read through fifty pages to find an equation I understand.)

A study of world civilizations, from Sumeria to Ancient Egypt to the Roman Empire of pre-Columbian North America and tiny Easter Island, that argues that over and over again, human beings have built societies that have grown and prospered by exploiting the Earth's resources, only to expand to the point where those resources could no longer sustain the societies' populations, and subsequently collapse. In this context, the collapse of Rome has vital importance for our modern global civilization. Destructive environmental behaviour today takes place on a scale much greater than in previous times, and the results will be similarly multiplied. This book, calmly and sanely, argues for an increased realization of the finite nature of our resources, and the impact on our world should we continue squandering those resources.

From Library Journal British historian Ponting provides a fascinating and comprehensive environmental perspective on the rise and fall of civilizations, including the Sumerians, the Egyptians, and the Mayans. Beginning with hunting-and-gathering societies, settled societies, and the industrialized societies of today, he describes how each has had greater effects on the environment than the last. Settled societies use more resources to support larger populations, often overextending the resources available. "Since the rise of settled societies . . . the majority of the world's population have lived in conditions of grinding poverty." Ponting's forecast for the future based on current population trends and available resources is equally bleak. "To feed the whole world on the diet enjoyed by the average American, using the same level of inputs into agriculture, would require all the world's current oil production and exhaust known reserves within not much more than a decade." A significant contribution that needs to be available and promoted in every public library. - Mary J. Nickum, Fish and Wildlife Reference Svce., Bethesda, Md. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Kirkus SA comprehensive assessment of humanity's assault on the environment across the centuries, by British historian Ponting (University College, Swansea). Examining the interaction between societies and their surroundings from the earliest hunter-gatherer groups on, Ponting describes the first great leap of civilization--the development of crops and agriculture--as the start of a systematic environmental transformation. As groups settled near their fields and as populations grew, the burden on the land increased, and at times the ecological pressure grew too great. Crop irrigation, the author says, led to increased salination and diminished yields, while a loss of forest cover brought erosion and the destruction of precious arable land. The Sumerian civilization in the Middle East and the Mayans of Central America, among others, fell victim to these limits to growth, with the collapse in some cases being precipitous. Other societies survived, however, to participate in the more recent great transition involving the use of fossil fuels for energy. With this step, Ponting says, environmental degradation increased exponentially through pollution at all stages of the industrialization process--and, in addition, the industrialized societies, by their exploitation of others less advanced, created the Third World, with its Pandora's Box of poverty, overpopulation, and other social ills that continue to worsen today. Ponting suggests no solutions, marking instead the devastating course of human progress and the ruins that serve as its milestones. Few colorful anecdotes, but an impressive accumulation of evidence culled from the annals of recorded history: a sobering view of a planet deeply in peril. (Maps and charts.) -- Copyright 1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. "If there is a single book on the subject to engage the enthusiast, silence the cynic and enlighten the ignoramus, this is it" \* Observer \* "Ponting's re-evaluation of history is an important antidote to mental troglodytism. It also makes a welcome change from the scatter-gun apocalypse-mongering which has become standard fare in green literature. With luck and foresight, and more books like this, we may yet learn our lesson" \* Independent on Sunday \* "Pioneering...a book good enough to rival the best American products in the field... Clive Ponting has embraced a daunting task with commendable success" \* Times Literary Supplement \* "An ambitious and thought-provoking attempt to rewrite history from an ecological standpoint" \* Independent \* "Large, ambitious and often enthralling, it is a successful attempt to look at the unfolding of world history from an entirely new perspective" \* Literary \*