**LAND OF THE GIANTS**  by Jena Malone with Stephen Hanks

Once Upon a Time, Easter Island Was a Lush Land in the South Pacific. Today, Huge Stone Statues Built 1,000 Years Ago Are a Reminder of How This Beautiful Place Became a Lost Paradise.

     Close your eyes and picture a South Pacific island. Do you see tall, flowing trees, colorful flowers, exotic animals, and fruits aplenty? Most people would imagine the same thing. Is it any wonder that when the crew of an English ship called the BOUNTY encountered such an island--Tahiti--more than 200 years ago they didn't want to leave the South Pacific?

     A long, long time ago there was another South Pacific island that was such a paradise. But about 1,200 years after settlers first arrived there, a land that was lush had been turned into mush. Why? How? The main answer to those questions can be found in the pictures\* you see on these pages--huge stone statues carved a millennium ago. The statues' creators were a resourceful people, but they couldn't know that the building of these massive and mysterious megaliths would contribute to the destruction of their land's limited natural resources. Nearly 1,500 years after the island was first settled, there were almost 10 times more statues on it than people. Here's how an island paradise became a land of the giants.

     SETTLERS AND STATUES

     The island that is now known as Easter Island or **Rapa** **Nui** (as the Polynesians have called it since the 1860s) sits in the Pacific Ocean. It is about 1,200 miles east of Pitcairn Island and 2,200 miles west of Chile (a country in South America), making it the most remote inhabited island in the world. The island is just 63 square miles, less than a quarter the size of New York's Manhattan Island. It became known as Easter Island after it was spotted by Dutch navigator Jacob Roggeveen on Easter Sunday in 1722.

     According to legend, Polynesian chief named Hotu Matu'a ("The Great Parent") sailed with his family from an unknown island and landed on Easter Island sometime around A.D. 400. The Polynesian people were very good navigators and could travel thousands of miles in wooden canoes just by following the stars. These first settlers, who called the island Te Pito O Te Henua (Navel of the World), had brought chickens along with seeds for the planting of fruits and vegetables in their new home's lush palm forest. They also enjoyed the island's natural resources, such as plants and the fish in the surrounding sea.

     Sometime around A.D. 700, the people began building ceremonial platforms called "ahu." A few centuries later they began carving gigantic statues out of the island's volcanic rock found in quarries around the island. One of the main sites on Easter Island, Rano Raraku, is the crater of an inactive volcano. The statues, which average 13 feet in height and have an average weight of 14 tons, are called "moai" (moe-eye). The ahu average about four feet high.

     All moai are legless statues that look like people, but some moai are short and stout, while others are tall and thin. Some moai are topped with "pukao," a red stone cylinder that looks like a hat. Some have tattoos and some wear a carved cloth below their hips. Anthropologists say the different island groups or clans constructed their own particular style of moai.

     What role did the moai play in this island's culture? Some archaeologists believe the moai represent the spirits of ancestors or other important males in the island's society. Archaeologist Jo Anne Van Tilburg, who has studied **Rapa** **Nui** for almost 20 years, calls it "one of the world's most special islands." Van Tilburg believes the statues were created in the image of island chiefs. She also thinks their builders considered the moai to be sacred and built them as a way of communicating with their heavenly gods. "The moai exist between sky and earth, people and chiefs, and chiefs and gods," says Van Tilburg.

     ERODING AN ENVIRONMENT

     For about 500 years, between A.D. 1000 and 1500, life on **Rapa** **Nui** thrived. Trees, plants, birds, and fish were plentiful. But during this period two other things became plentiful--people and moai. (See COLLAPSE OF A CULTURE). This population and statue boom eventually strained the island's resources. More trees were cut down, not just to build shelter and canoes, but to construct the rolling logs and wooden scaffolding that would carry the enormous statues from the quarries to their ultimate locations. (See SO, YOU WANT TO MOVE A MOAI?) More crops had to be grown to feed those building the moai. The pressure to clear land and chop down trees, called DEFORESTATION, also led to erosion of the island's precious soil.

     As food, supplies, and fertile land decreased, panic among the island's clans increased. The clans fought to take control of what was left of **Rapa** Nui's resources. Since the moai symbolized sacred power, the ultimate act of warfare and revenge was tearing down another clan's moai. From A.D. 1700 to 1800, warring clans either destroyed moai or knocked them off their ahus. By the mid-1800s, there wasn't one moai left standing.

     In the middle of this chaos, the islanders got an unexpected visit. When Dutch navigator Jacob Roggeveen arrived on **Rapa** **Nui** on Easter in 1722, he was the first European to set foot on the remote island. Roggeveen's first impression was of a barren, treeless land with withered grass, burnt vegetation, and hungry people living in poverty.

     The islanders, on the other hand, had a different first impression of their European visitors. The day after Roggeveen landed, 114 of his fellow Dutchmen came ashore, saw the island inhabitants as threatening savages, and killed about a dozen. Perhaps that is why the faces of the moai seem more sad than spiritual. It was yet another example of human beings attacking what they fear or can't understand.

     Today, Easter Island looks very much the same as when Roggeveen landed there 277 years ago. Only now it attracts thousands of tourists each year, curious about the island's strange statues and fascinating history. Over the years archeologists like Van Tilburg have helped raise the fallen moai and many of the surviving 886 statues have been transported to their original ahu platforms.

     Now, as these mystical moai stand silently on their barren island, they appear as though they want to speak to us. What would they say? Perhaps they would tells us to learn a lesson from Easter Island's story--that if our civilization is to survive, it is very important to protect any earthly paradise.

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     COLLAPSE OF A CULTURE

     How and when did the culture and environment on Easter Island evolve and ultimately erode? This timeline tracks the story of a lost paradise.

     A.D. 400

     About 100 Polynesian settlers arrive on what will be called Easter Island after sailing great distances in canoes.

     A.D. 700

     Building of more than 200 stone platforms called ahu begins. Years later, giant stone statues called moai will be placed atop the ahu.

     A.D. 1000-1500

     Majority of nearly 1,000 stone moai are carved in quarries. By 1500, the island's human population is more than 10,000.

     1600-1700

     Island's forests have been chopped down, the rich soil is eroded, springs are dried up, and most birds and fish have disappeared.

     1722

     On Easter Day, Dutch navigator Jacob Roggeveen lands on the island, which was unknown to Europeans. He calls it EASTER ISLAND.

     1860s

     Tahitian sailors give Easter Island the name **RAPA** **NUI** because it reminds them of **Rapa**, a small island in French Polynesia.

     1877

     By this time war, famine, and disease have reduced population to just 111. Not a single moai remains upright.

     1888

     Easter Island becomes a territory of Chile, a country in South America. Population of the island is back up to about 2,000.

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     SO, YOU WANT TO MOVE A MOAI?

     If you think carving a 14-ton statue out of rock is tough, imagine trying to move it the length of a few football fields when all you have handy is logs, rope and rock? Archaeologist Jo Anne Van Tilburg didn't just imagine it. She wanted to figure out how Easter Island's early settlers moved their massive moai to various locations on the island.

     In 1997, Van Tilburg's project began with the construction of a 13-foot-high, 14-ton moai replica. At the same time, the members of her research team harvested trees that would be used as rails to form a 120-foot long track and a transport sled to carry the moai. Then, 20 men and women on ropes pulled the moai along the track. After every 120-feet, the team would reset the rails in front of the moai. In about 40 to 50 seconds, the team moved their moai 300 feet. Later, wooden logs and rocks were used to make the moai stand up.

     Van Tilburg concluded that 40 Easter Islanders moved the moai about a mile a day, and that 20 people could pull it to a standing position.

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     DIG UP MORE: Nova online has a terrific web site where you can learn much more about Easter Island and its moai megaliths. There's even a "move the moai game," which is more like a mind-bending jigsaw puzzle. Go check it out! The address is www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/easter/

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     DIG DATA: Many Easter Island moai have bodies that extend 20 to 40 feet underground. The largest moai, El Gigante (The Giant), is nearly 72 feet high and weighs between 14 and 16 tons.

     MASS MOAI: Once the moai were carved in the quarries, many of them would be moved to stone platforms called ahu. Moai could appear on the island all alone or in groups as large as 15. All but one group were positioned standing with their backs towards the ocean, like the one above.\*

     MOAI MISFITS: This kneeling and bearded moai\* is named Tukuturi and is the only one of its kind on the island. The eyes of the moai below\* are made of white coral and red stone and are put back into their sockets once a year at an Easter Island festival.

     **RAPA** **NUI** ROCKS: Hundreds of rocks with petroglyph carvings share space with the moai on Easter Island. Most of the rock art images are found at the ceremonial village known as Orango. Many petroglyphs depict the birdman god Makemake.

     STYLIN' ON THE ISLAND: Easter Island's moai were carved as legless statues in human male form. They had extended ear lobes, pursed lips, and long arms bent at the elbow. Some moai heads were topped with hat-like stone cylinders, called "pukao," which make them look like they had a very bad day at the barber shop.

Malone, Jena. "Land of the Giants." *Archaeology's Dig Vol. , No.*. Oct./Nov. 1999: 10-15. *SIRS Discoverer.* Web. 17 Sep 2013.