

This is history repeating itself

Cults, aliens, a secluded island, and a valuable lesson. As **Alexandra Pope** explains, Easter Island has had them all

The story of Easter Island has the makings of a great movie.

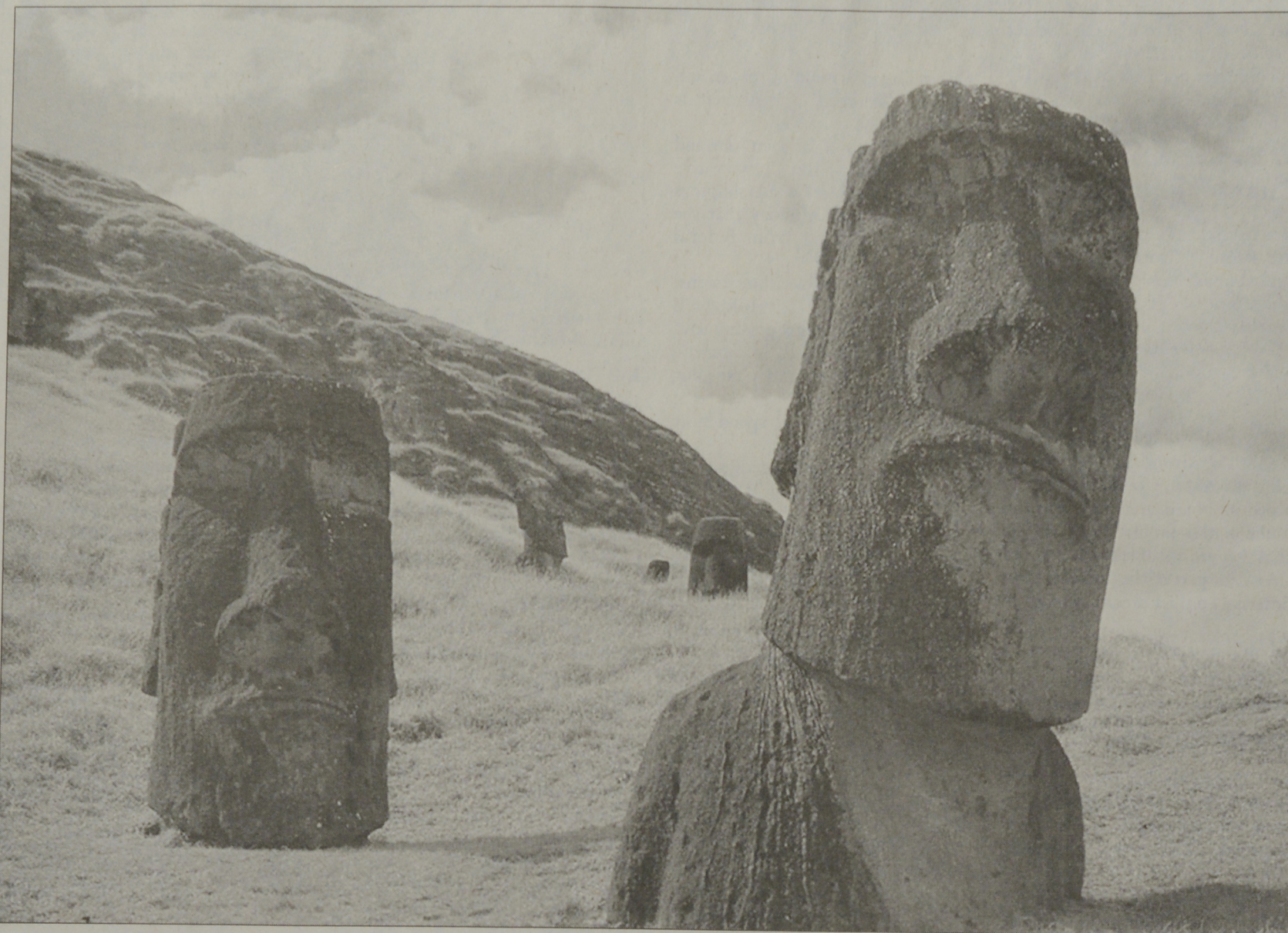
It contains all the blockbuster elements: a secluded paradise in the middle of the Pacific; a race of artistic, intelligent, and extremely culturally-aware people; rumours of extraterrestrial forces at play; a finite environment threatened by the greed of its human inhabitants; brutal civil war; cannibalism; absurd religious sects ... and best of all, it's completely true.

I first heard the story of Easter Island from an extremely unlikely source: a disgruntled gym teacher who somehow wound up teaching World Issues to an unruly group of 12th graders. The semester was winding down, and I believe he was running out of material to teach us, so he plunked us down in front of a television and showed us a video entitled 'Easter Island, Earth Island,' which outlined for us the epic tale of the island - known otherwise as Rapa Nui - and its alarming implications for the rest of the planet. It turned out to be the best lesson he gave all year.

You see, as more becomes known about the tragic fate of Rapa Nui and its inhabitants, the easier it becomes for historians and environmental activists alike to draw startling parallels between Easter Island and the planet at large, parallels that point to Easter Island as a kind of preview to the main feature, in a sense, if we in modern times continue on our current path of environmental degradation and depletion.

The island of Rapa Nui lies roughly 2000 miles off the coast of Chile, and is so isolated it has earned the nickname 'the bellybutton of the world.'

The first Polynesian settlers to arrive there in elliptical wooden boats discovered a volcanic island covered in lush palm forests and mineral-rich soil, perfect for cultivating the plant specimens they brought with them



The massive moai were sculpted with rock mined from a dormant volcano and worshipped by the islanders.

from their unknown homeland.

They thrived in their ocean oasis for generations, developing a unique religious culture that was centred on worshipping the wise, deific essence that they believed resided in everyone, a kind of magical force that they called manna. It was their belief that when a person died, their manna remained with the people, to guard them and give them insight. So, the people of Rapa Nui used sturdy rock mined from the crater of one of the island's dormant volcanoes, Rano Raraku, to house their spirits in the afterlife.

These giant head statues were called

moai, and remain scattered around the island today. They are the most easily recognizable feature of Easter Island, having been made famous by a mid-nineties ad campaign for Drisan nasal spray.

Far from being pop culture icons in the 16th century, however, the moai were sacred to the islanders, who would pray before them to receive the manna of their dead ancestors, and also to honour their memory, thereby keeping the manna strong for future generations.

One of the enduring mysteries of the moai is how they came to stand where they do today, on a number of hillsides and beaches all around the island, when their final resting place often turned out to be as far as 14 miles away from the crater they were fashioned in.

A popular theory links the Rapanuians with alien visitors who possessed the technology to transport the heavy moai; much more sensible theories point to the possibility that the moai were moved down the hillside on ropes suspended between carefully placed palm stumps, set onto rolling wooden platforms for overland transport, or even floated around the island on sturdy wooden rafts.

Either way, there is no doubt that the islanders' dependence on wood from the abundant palm forests of the island contributed to their inevitable downfall.

The population of Easter Island is said to have peaked at about 10,000 in 1550 AD. By this time, the culture of the moai had become less about spirituality and more about artistic competition. More and more complex efforts were required to transport increasingly elaborate moai designs by prideful artists, which put further strain on an already dwindling supply of wood. Fuel and housing needs for 10,000 islanders created unbelievable demand for the island's once abundant natural resources.

The disappearance of the palm forests led to swift erosion of the topsoil, with nothing left to anchor it, and as a result, the islanders' crops began to fail. The inhabitants of Easter Island suddenly found themselves in a crisis: no food.

Stranded on an island 2,000 miles from the nearest populated land mass, they had come to believe that they were the only living beings in the entire universe - a popular myth reveals that the Easter Islanders thought that the rest of the world had been obliterated by a great flood, and only their island had been spared. This thought, while once a matter of pride, became a major deterrent to any ideas they might have had of leaving and going in search of a new home. Besides, there was no longer any wood to be spared for the creation of boats.

The island erupted in a violent civil war, as various clans and tribes formed for support and then clashed over rights to what little food remained. Many of the moai, once the symbols of the peoples' strength and courage, were toppled and smashed, and thousands of people were killed. Archaeological evidence shows that,

in their desperation, the islanders resorted to cannibalism, picking clean the carcasses of their own dead for nourishment.

At the height of the war, the population of the island dwindled to just 750, and the once glorious culture of Rapa Nui was in shambles.

So what does any of this have to do with us?

Well, consider this: a series of the most fantastic coincidences in the history of time created a planet that is exactly the right distance from its sun to ensure that its surface neither boils nor freezes. By another random twist of fate, that same planet developed an atmosphere that was conducive to the creation of vast enough quantities of water to support the many diverse oxygen-breathing life forms that managed to evolve over the eons to the extent that they have recently invented things like logic, reason, emotion, religion, and culture - all uniquely Earthly concepts.

I say these concepts are unique to Earth because the fact of the matter is, to date there has been no evidence to dispel the notion that we are alone. Granted, we share a planet with six billion of our fellow human beings, so we don't often experience profound feelings of loneliness, but even our most advanced technological creations and mathematical theories have failed to reveal any signs of intelligent life beyond our single, anomalous planet.

The Rapanuians undoubtedly experienced similar feelings of doubt - after all, their forefathers had to have come from somewhere - but the physical reality of the vast ocean that surrounded them proved to be a major constraint to their idealism. We on Earth find ourselves in the same situation, confronted with the reality of an ocean of space containing an infinite number of possibilities for life beyond ours, but are reluctantly forced to admit that this one crummy planet is all we get.

Don't get me wrong - I've seen a lot of sci-fi in my day and, given the choice, I think I'd opt to live here on Earth. But I'm all for us waking up to the idea that, despite our cultural or religious differences, we are all citizens of this isolated little paradise known as Earth, and completely at the mercy of our own decisions, for better or for worse.

Easter Island is a dramatic, small-scale example of what may happen if we deplete our finite stock of natural resources to the point of no return. Although, having recently learned that 0.1-0.3% of our planet's water resources is available for human consumption - and note that I said available, not safe - I'm more inclined to predict that our most bitter conflicts will erupt over a lack of water rather than a lack of trees.

It isn't likely to happen in our lifetime, but that doesn't mean that our decisions are of no consequence to future generations. Consider the much-quoted 'butterfly effect,' and then consider whether or not you are comfortable with the idea of your great-great-great-great-grandchildren eating each other.

Maybe I exaggerate slightly, but if

that's what it takes to drive home the message that this is all we have, to make it last, then so be it.

Now, it didn't end all badly for the Easter Islanders who survived the war. They were saved by the creation of an absurd new cult, the Birdman cult, which prized physical prowess and mutual cooperation over mystic wisdom and artistic vision. They

established leaders annually, through a contest of physical ability and cunning that involved making the men climb down a 300-foot cliff, swim through shark-infested waters to one of three smaller islands off the coast, steal the egg of the nesting sooty tern (a native bird), swim back, and scale the same cliff, all the while ensuring that the egg remained intact. The first man to complete the challenge became the new leader, until the next Birdman contest.

Through careful rationing and reforestation initiatives directed by the Birdman, the population of Easter Island remained small and stable for a number of years, and though they were not thriving, they were surviving, which was enough.

Then a bunch of Dutch missionaries found the island, scared the living daylights out of the islanders (each party thought the other was an alien band), shot a whole lot of them after the Birdman of the day tried to steal the Dutch captain's hat, and sold the rest into the slave trade. That's where the parallels end.

Still, to only interpret the story of Easter Island as an isolated historic tragedy would be to ignore the bigger picture: that we are on the brink of our own resource crisis, and that we are in need of some kind of intervention to guide us back from the edge.

I'm not saying we need a Birdman cult - although it has definite potential as the next sporting craze. I am, however, willing to venture that we require leadership in the spirit of the Birdmen of old: an individual or group of individuals who would enforce cooperation, macro-manage, and most of all, understand that there are no limits to growth, but that the quality of life for those doing the growing depends exclusively on how much we are able to provide, if we can provide anything at all.

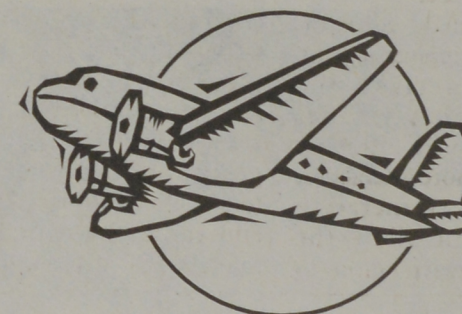
And that, of course, is another story altogether.

56th annual Red 'N Black Revue

Three months of anticipation comes to a climax this Friday, as MCs Meg Folkins and Jason Stanley host UNB's annual live talent showcase. All sixteen acts have been working their butts off, and come February 20th, you will be entertained to the fullest. Buy your tickets at the SUB Paper Trail before it's too late!

Friday, 7pm • Centre Communautaire, Ecole St. Anne • \$4 students / \$6 others

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XXX Info Session

For UNB Students

- on exchange Programs with Australia, Cuba, Germany, USA, France, Spain, Mexico, Denmark, Norway and Sweden.
 - on Intersession Programs in Turkey & Mexico
 - on Overseas Language Study
 - on Overseas Work Opportunities
- Thursday, Feb 19 & Friday Feb 20
SUB, Room 103
12:00 - 1:00p.m.

Have a Winter Break

The International Student Advisor, CIDA coordinator's Office, and the Badminton Club - UNB Recreation Department is hosting a yearly

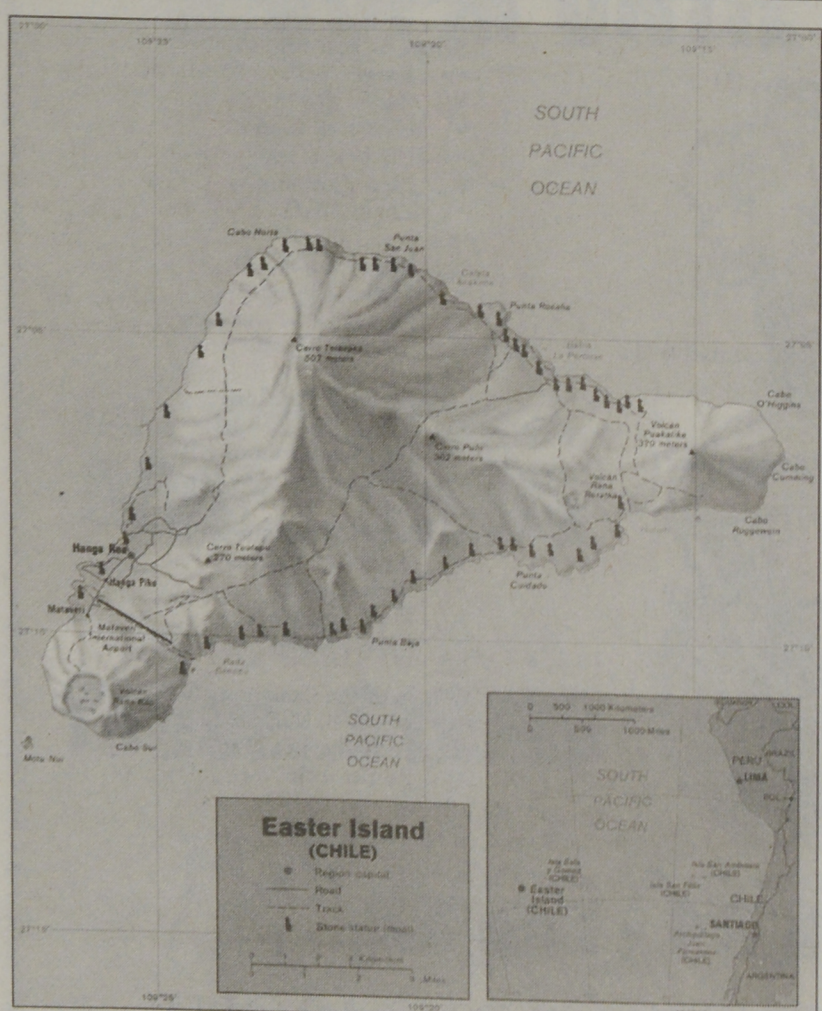
BADMINTON TOURNAMENT

Men's singles, men's doubles, women's singles, women's doubles and mixed doubles will be held. This event is opened up for all International students and members of the badminton club. registration fee is \$3 for Singles games and \$5 for Doubles games. Cash prize ward will be awarded to the winner of the games. Lunch and drinks will be provided for the afternoon. If you are interested, please register at:

1. International Student Advisor Office
Alumni Memorial Building.
2. Mrs. Gangu Bittira, Room 314,
Department of Civil Engineering, Old Head Hall

Before February 20

Entrance is limited, grab your seat before its too late!
Date: Feb 28, UNB West Gym 9:00 a.m. - 10 p.m.



At top: The giant head statues (moai) were distributed all over the island, which led some to believe aliens helped move them. Below: Its isolation a godsend at first, a depletion in natural resources left the inhabitants stranded.