Collapse of a Society

Social Studies 8

**By Adam Woelders**

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| Big Idea  * Human and environmental factors shape changes in population and living standards.  Curricular Competencies  * Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions * Determine which causes most influenced particular decisions, actions, or events, and assess their short-and long-term consequences (cause and consequence)  Content  * changes in population and living standards  First Peoples Principles of Learning  * Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions. |

### Possible key concepts:

* collapse of societies
* demographic decline
* climate change
* famine
* deforestation
* natural resource depletion
* colonization

### Essential questions:

1. For what reasons have societies collapsed?
2. How do environmental factors play a role in the collapse of a society?
3. By the actions of individuals, do societies choose to fail or succeed?

What can the collapse of past societies teach us about the long-term consequences of our decisions and actions today?

# Thinking about Teaching

Social Studies 8 is a broad exploration of big ideas and concepts from the 7th through the 18th centuries that continue to have global impacts and influence. In this course, teachers can create lessons that make students’ thinking visible as they investigate an important concept, analyze sources of information, select relevant details, and deploy them in complex arguments that result in deep understanding across time and space. The flexibility of the Content and Curricular Competencies allows teachers to choose an engaging topic to unpack for students, while simultaneously allowing students to explore a variety of pathways in their learning and a variety of possible answers to some essential questions.

This lesson is designed to present students with an opportunity to explore a very important historical and geographic concept: **the decline or collapse of human societies**. Students explore this concept over different time periods and global regions to gain a wider perspective and deeper understanding of how human societies have failed in the past. They can also peer into the future and speculate as to whether our own post-industrial, liberal democratic states are on a trajectory toward collapse or whether we can make decisions today to help ensure the long-term survival of our society.

The aim of the lesson is for students to gain an understanding of the complex forces at work in dramatic declines in human populations and standards of living. In achieving this aim, the lesson acknowledges the **First Peoples Principles of Learning** that *our actions have consequences* and that there is much to be learned from those who have journeyed before us. Additionally, there are options allowing students to assess the factors that have led to the decline of Indigenous peoples locally and globally.

The **Core Competencies** are embedded in all aspects of this lesson. Students’ thinking is made visible at various points through discussion and debate about what causes of societal collapse are most significant (question and investigate) using a variety of assigned and found sources of information that they will have to evaluate. Students make criteria-based judgments about the actions of societies, based on comparisons of different times and places (analyze and critique). In so doing, students will recognize connections between the forces that caused the collapse of past societies and the decisions we make today (contributing to community and caring for the environment). Finally, students will communicate their thinking throughout the lesson (acquire, interpret, and present information) as a class, as a small collaborative group, and as individual learners (connect and engage with others).

# Proposed Scope and Sequence

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| **Activities and Tasks** | **Materials** | **Considerations** |
| 1. **Introduction: Think/Pair/Share [5 mins]**   Set the stage for students’ thinking and engage their imaginations with a possible future narrative:  …Imagine a future in which our once vibrant society has collapsed, the forests have disappeared, the population has shrunk by 90%, there is no government, cities are no longer inhabited and only ruins stand in their place, there is little food and no means to travel away from this place… What happened to make it this way? | * Video projection – if you wish to use images or photographs to spark students’ imagination and curiosity:   + Examples: the work of artists; images from filmmakers like Edward Burtynsky (<http://bit.ly/29KS0k1>) | Engage students in thinking about the concept of “societal collapse”:  Ask: Do you think societal collapse has happened before? Where? When? (Students should have some ideas.)  Refer to disaster movies (e.g., opening scene from *Waterworld*) to generate students’ thinking. How realistic are they? How probable?  **Assessing learning**:   * Do students understand the concepts of society and collapse? Do they understand that a collapse is a significant decline in population and living standards? Do you need to provide examples? * Are the possible reasons they are suggesting consistent with the factors they will later investigate? |
| 1. **Compass Points [10 mins]**   For more information on the Compass Points thinking routine, see<http://bit.ly/1bwmLpi> or R. Ritchhardt et al. (2009), *Make Thinking Visible*.  **Essential question:** For what reasons do societies collapse? | * Chart paper * **Organizer 2-1** –helpful if you want students to do some pre-thinking prior to the activity * Statement posted somewhere in the room (e.g., via PPT): **Humans’ decisions determine whether societies collapse or succeed.** | Post chart paper around the room before students arrive. Students rotate in groups to add ideas to each of the four charts:   * N – What do I **need** to know or find out about? * E – What **excites** me about this proposition? * S – What is my **stance** on this proposition? (i.e., How much do I agree?) * W – What **worries** me about this proposition?   Follow up on the Compass Points activity by discussing and reviewing students’ ideas.  **Assessing learning**:   * Are students considering other viewpoints? (social responsibility) * Is students’ thinking about possible reasons for collapse developed? Are reasons plausible at this point? * Are students making connections with what they already know about climate change, colonization, and so on? |
| 1. **Case Study: Easter Island [30–50 mins]**   **Essential question:** Do environmental reasons usually play the most significant in the collapse of a society?  Provide a brief introduction to Easter Island:   * First visited by Europeans in 1772, the island was a mystery because of the apparent signs of a thriving, but now struggling, native society – the Rapanui – who had built hundreds of impressive statues. * The Rapanui had all but disappeared by the late 1800s. * Jared Diamond explained the reasons for their demise in a 1995 article, but others have since made counter-arguments.   Have students make some predictions and then read the article, looking for evidence of each of the factors they have listed. This can be done collaboratively or individually.  Ask students to read carefully, thinking about the significance of each factor in causing the collapse of the Rapanui on Easter Island. Instruct students to provide reasoned judgments about and rank each factor on a scale of 0–4:   * 0 [not relevant] * 1 [marginally significant] * 2 [somewhat significant] * 3 [mostly significant] * 4 [very significant]   Follow up students’ thinking by discussing as a class this question: Were environmental factors the most significant cause of the Rapanui’s decline? (**Note:** The polarization in this question is intentional: it is intended to generate a more focused classroom discussion/controversy. It also may encourage students to think critically about the role of climate change and ecological destruction in possibly altering the future of our society.) | * Jared Diamond (1995), Easter’s End, *Discover*:<http://discovermagazine.com/1995/aug/eastersend543> **Note:** You may opt to modify the article by cutting and pasting selections of it into a separate Word document, or using the article in its entirety but modifying sentences or word selection where needed to make it accessible for the reading level of students. An alternative is to create an outline of the article for students to use, or to guide less advanced readers through the article using small group reading instruction. * Map – locate Easter Island * Images (optional) – Easter Island statues (moai), landscape, etc. * **Organizer 3-1** * Video (optional) – provides a short overview of Easter Island’s collapse: <http://bit.ly/29H6r96> | Have students make some predictions about what factors were most likely to have caused the collapse of the Rapanui society:   * foreign invasions * disease * climate change * environmental factors * destruction of natural resources * overpopulation * war * political factors   Possible **criteria for judging the significance of a factor** in causing the collapse of a society (alternatively, the criteria could be generated by students):   1. There is evidence that it caused a drastic decline in the original population. 2. There is evidence that it negatively affected the living standards or quality of life of the society. 3. It directly caused the society to be absorbed or colonized by a foreign power. 4. It caused a dramatic loss of culture, memory, or identity of the society.   Post the criteria for students to see, discuss, or improve so that all students know what to consider when judging the significance of a factor.  **Assessing learning**:   * Are students noticing the details of the article’s origin, and speculating about reliability and whether the author’s claims are reasonable? * Are students using criteria to make judgments? * Are students using evidence from the article(s) to support their evaluation of significance?   **Formative assessment**:   * Suggestion: As students are making their thinking visible, circulate around the room to provide feedback on the quality of their judgments by using a “secret check” – don’t tell students what the check is for (supporting the judgment with detailed evidence from the article), but rather let them try to figure out what you are noticing about their thinking. |
| 1. **Comparing sources of information [optional; 20–30 mins]**   For an alternative perspective on the collapse of Easter Island, students may compare the Diamond article to another article: T. Hunt (2006), Rethinking the Fall of Easter Island, *American Scientist*.  This is a useful activity for encouraging students to develop the thinking they will need to select quality information sources in the summative task. | * **Organizer 4-1** * T. Hunt (2006), Rethinking the Fall of Easter Island, *American Scientist*: <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/num2/rethinking-the-fall-of-easter-island/1> | Discuss/consider the similarities of and differences between the two articles:   * How do the articles differ? How do they corroborate each other? * Is one article more convincing than the other? Why? * Dig deeper: Who are the authors? Are they authoritative experts in this topic? * How does each author support their arguments? What evidence is used?   Students should have the thinking routine of paying close attention to details of the sources. Students should have some understanding of how to select quality information sources. These two articles provide an opportunity to review some important considerations:   * Is the author(s) an authority on this topic or does he or she have some expertise? * Does the source contain advertisements or some other means of making a profit from the information it contains? * Is the information current? Or is there more recent information? * Does the author support his ideas with evidence or references? Can you trace where the ideas came from? * Is the reading level appropriate? Can you understand what the author is explaining?   **Assessing learning**:   * Can students find out the details about the article’s origins (e.g., date published, author’s identity) * Can students assess the quality of an argument or perspective? * Can students corroborate two different sources of information? * Do students have sound criteria for selecting quality sources of information? |
| 1. **Jigsaw inquiry [50–70 mins]**   **Essential question:** For what reasons have societies collapsed?  **Essential question:** What can the collapse of past societies teach us about the long-term consequences of our decisions and actions today?  Have students apply their understanding of the factors in the collapse of Easter Island by examining at least one other society or culture and determining what factors were more significant in its decline or collapse. Possibilities in the SS8 content and time frame include:   * Maya * Tang dynasty (China) * Inca * Aztec * Aboriginal Tasmanians * Wendat (Huron) Peoples * Great Zimbabwe (Africa)   Students’ research should require them to find and select online resources. The research and evaluation of factors in the society’s or culture’s decline can be conducted individually or as a small group of 2–3.  Students can decide what is the most effective format for sharing their conclusions about factors they have identified as significant.  Alternatively, since students may have their own questions by now about why societies collapse, you may want to create space for students to pursue those questions. | * Online sources selected by students – require students to find a minimum of two sources to corroborate information * **Organizer 5-1** –may be helpful for students in selecting sources * **Organizer 5-2** – use for researching a collapsed society | If you have students work collaboratively, each student should have a defined role.  Review the criteria for the task with students before beginning. Start with a checklist. However, it is preferable to withhold the assessment rubric until students are ready to submit their presentation of learning for assessment and are sure it meets the criteria.  As an alternative to assigning class presentations of their learning, consider organizing an opportunity for students to discuss with each other and share findings (e.g., gallery walk).  **Assessing learning**:   * Are students able to apply the thinking they demonstrated about the collapse of Easter Island to a new society? |

# Organizer 2-1: Compass Points

Humans’ decisions determine

whether societies collapse or succeed.

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|  | What do I **need** to know about this? |  |
| What is **worrisome** about this? |  | What is **exciting** about this? |
|  | What **stance** do I have on this? |  |

# Organizer 3-1: Case Study

Easter Island’s End?

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| ***Do environmental reasons usually play the most significant in the collapse of a society?*** |

**Source #1:** Jared Diamond (1995), Easter’s End, *Discover*:<http://discovermagazine.com/1995/aug/eastersend543>

**Criteria for judging significance:**

* **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**
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| **Possible factors**  *Before reading, predict which ones you think might be most significant.* | **Judgment of significance**  0 [not relevant] 🡪 4 [very significant] | **Evidence**  *Include reasoning for your judgment and use evidence from the article to support your thinking.* |
| 1. **Environmental factors** |  |  |
| 1. **Foreign invasion** |  |  |
| 1. **Climate change** |  |  |
| 1. **Destruction of natural resources** |  |  |
| 1. **Overpopulation** |  |  |
| 1. **Disease** |  |  |
| 1. **Conflict** |  |  |

**Conclusions:**

**Self-assessment checklist**

* Did I carefully assess the significance of each factor?
* Can I explain why the Rapanui society collapsed?
* Were my judgments supported by clear reasoning and evidence from the article?
* According to Diamond, how significant were environmental factors compared to others?
* How convincing is Diamond’s argument?
* Have other failed societies collapsed for the same reasons?

# Organizer 4-1: Comparing Different Sources of Information

Compare the new article(T. Hunt, 2006, Rethinking the Fall of Easter Island, *American Scientist*: <http://bit.ly/29JVVKn)> to the article you examined about Easter Island.

**DIFFERENCES**

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| **Diamond, J. (1995), “Easter’s End”** |  | **Hunt, T. (2006), “Rethinking the Fall of Easter Island”** |
|  | **Origins of the article?**  **Author’s background?**  **⇐⇒** |  |
|  | **Evidence used to support arguments?**  **⇐⇒** |  |
|  | **Credibility?**  **Convincing?**  **⇐⇒** |  |
|  | **Factors the author claims led to collapse of Easter Island?**  **⇐⇒** |  |

**SIMILARITIES**

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| **How do the articles corroborate each other?** |

# Organizer 5-1: Evaluating Information Sources

Good thinkers also think about and assess the quality and reliability of the information they use.

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| 1. Question or topic of research: | |
| 1. Title of the website: | |
| 1. Website URL: | |
| 1. What type of web page are you evaluating? | |
| .com = commercial  .edu = educational or university  .gov/.gc.ca /.bc.ca = government | .org = non-profit organization  .ca /.bc.ca / etc. = government  Other? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |

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| S | SOURCE   * Yes/No/Somewhat: Can you tell who created the source? Can you tell what kind of source it is? (e.g., news, journal, blog) * Yes/No/Somewhat: Can you tell where and when the source was created? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Was the source created by a political organization or religious group or anyone else who might have a bias? |
| O | OBJECTIVE   * Yes/No/Somewhat: Why was this created? What is the purpose? Is the purpose achieved? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Is the purpose to sell something? Is it trying to convince you of something? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Is there advertising on the site? Does it affect the information quality or reliability? |
| U | USEFULNESS   * Yes/No/Somewhat: Can you make sense of it? Is the reading level appropriate? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Does it contain enough useful information to answer your questions? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Does it help you learn more about your topic or question? |
| R | RELIABILITY   * Yes/No /Somewhat: Does the author or creator have expertise or experience in the topic? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Is the information reliable? Can it be corroborated by with other sources? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Do the ideas and claims seem sensible or reasonable? Or do they make you suspicious or skeptical? |
| C | CONTENT   * Yes/No/Somewhat: Does it fit with what you already know about this topic? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Is the information engaging and interesting? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Is the information presented effectively? |
| E | EVIDENCE   * Yes/No/Somewhat: Can you use this source as evidence for what you have learned? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Does the author/creator support his or her claims and facts with other reliable sources? * Yes/No/Somewhat: Can you prove the reliability of this information source? What evidence would prove its reliability? |

Rate the quality and usefulness of the website:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| [0] | [1] | [2] | [3] | [4] | [5] |
| Not useful.  Unreliable. | Not very useful.  Untrustworthy. | Poor quality  of information. | Some good information.  Has some limitations. | Good. Useful and  reliable information. Reading level is appropriate. | Excellent. Information is very useful and is credible  and reliable. |

# Organizer 5-2: Student Research

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| ***For what reasons have societies collapsed?*** |

**Tasks:**

1. Choose at least one society or culture that has collapsed or declined significantly in the period 600 CE to 1750 CE. Select two quality sources of information about the collapse of that society to determine what factors played a role in its decline. You will become the leading expert in our class on this society’s collapse.
2. Choose an effective format in which to present and share your research with others in the class. An effective format will provide clear reasons why that society collapsed and will include detailed evidence to support a convincing argument. You should also provide some speculation about what we can learn about our own actions and decisions today from better understanding how societies in the past collapsed.
3. Consider carefully the criteria for achieving success:
   * Have you selected two quality sources of information to research your topic? Is your research well documented?
   * Can you identify some significant reasons for this society’s collapse?
   * Do you demonstrate expert knowledge about the reasons for this society’s collapse? Can you explain them well?
   * Is your presentation effective? Are your reasons communicated well and supported with detailed evidence? Is your argument convincing?
   * Can you make some informed connections between our actions and decisions today and the actions and decisions made by people in this collapsed society?

**My sources of information:**

**Source #1: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Source #2: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Research topic: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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| **Information source** | **Factor in collapse** | **Judgment of significance**  0 [not relevant] 🡪 4 [very significant] | **Evidence**  *Include reasoning for your judgment and use evidence to support your thinking.* |
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# Assessment of Learning

**Learning goals**:

* *Ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions.*
* *Determine which causes most influenced the collapse of societies.*

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| **Outstanding** | **Developed** | **Competent** | **Underdeveloped** |
| * Selected two quality sources of information from expert or authoritative sources. * Evidence of research and thinking is very clear and well documented with notes or a completed organizer. | * Selected two quality sources of information, but may not be from expert or authoritative sources. * Evidence of research and thinking is clear, but may be missing some minor details. | * Selected two sources of information, but reliability or usefulness isn’t clear. Sources may lack enough detail. * Evidence of research is present, but not consistently documented. | * Some evidence that the student struggled to select appropriate sources of information. * Research is not well documented; little evidence of student’s thinking is present. |
| * Factors in the society’s collapse are identified clearly and their significance is well reasoned and analyzed. | * Factors in the society’s collapse are identified and explained. | * Factors in the society’s collapse are identified but significance is not clear. Reasons may simply be listed, with limited analysis. | * Factors in the society’s collapse are not clear. |
| * Demonstrates expert knowledge of the topic. * Terms and concepts are used accurately. | * Demonstrates some expert knowledge but may contain some minor errors or slight inaccuracies. | * Knowledge is evident but either lacks consistent detail or contains some major factual inaccuracies. | * Knowledge is not sufficiently developed. |
| * Findings are presented effectively. * Judgments are very convincing. | * Findings are well presented and convincing, but may overlook something in planning that affects the quality of the judgments. | * Findings are presented but show some lack of planning and preparation. Ideas are not consistently communicated well. | * Findings are not communicated effectively. Little evidence of planning and preparation. |
| * Presentation includes discussion of long-term consequences of the society’s collapse and makes some connections to the potential impact of our own actions and decisions today. | * Presentation makes some connections to our own actions and decisions today. | * Presentation makes some connections to our own actions and decisions today, but they are not clear; vague or not convincing. | * Presentation makes few if any connections to our society. |