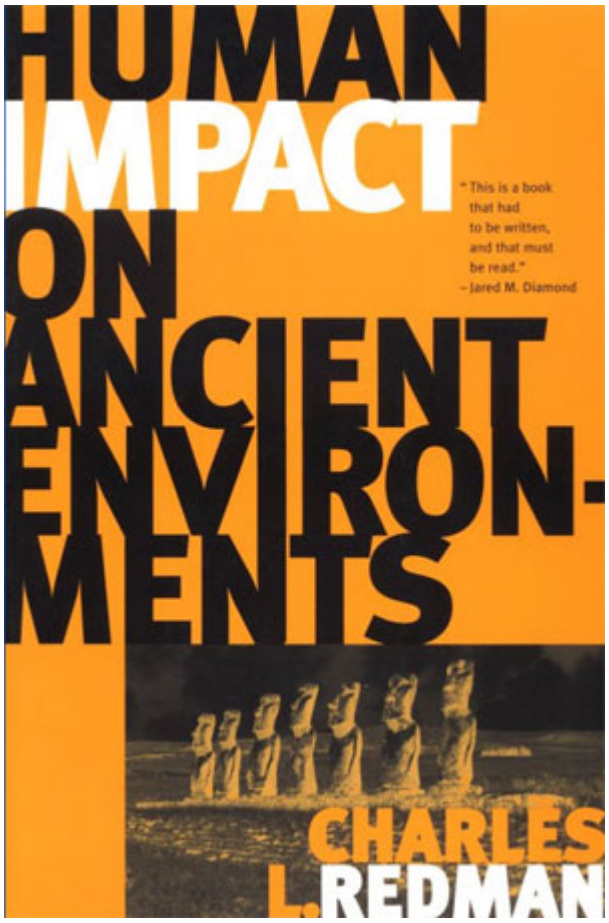
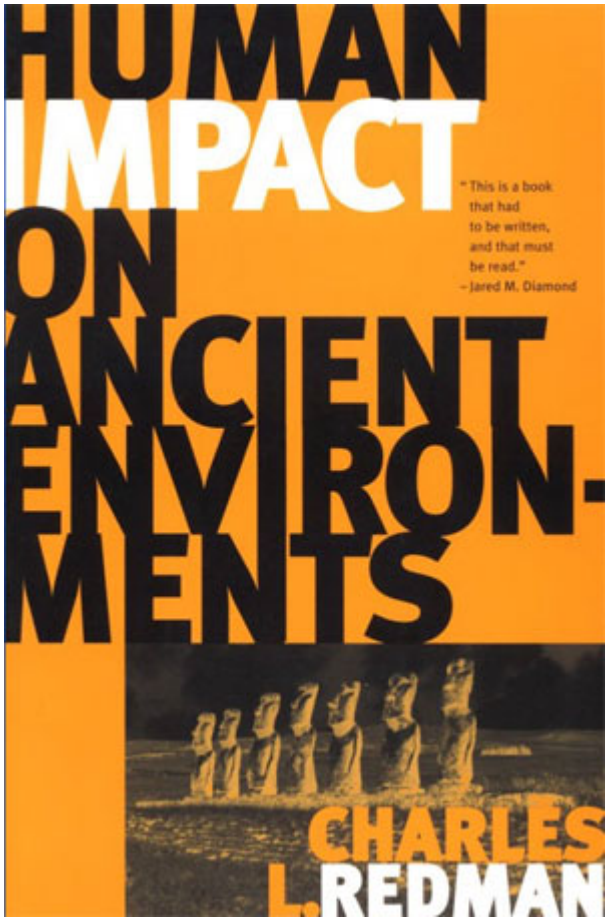
# CHARLES REDMAN ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS




It has taken me too long to get round to reading Charles Redman’s great book Human Impact on Ancient Environments – Arizona, 1999.




I came to the book because of the upcoming exhibition at the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford, of the photographs of Edward Burtynsky – they foreground massive environmental impacts. [Link]

We need a long term view to fully understand the growing environmental crisis. This requires an archaeological perspective. And the message the book delivers fully justifies a reliance on long-term large-scale archaeological evidence to get the right message about the shape of *recent* relationships with the environment.

Here are Redman's main points:

- The current environmental crisis is only the latest in what is the pattern of human inhabitation
- The main difference today is scale
- Virtually all societies have developed practices that degrade the environment
- And, here is an awkward point, many native American and south American societies were out of harmony with the environment (the evidence is very clear in the American SW, Maya lowlands and, increasingly in Amazonia) – there was no pre-

Columbian eden

- We have no evidence of a golden age when people lived harmoniously with nature – no conservationist eden
- There never has been a paradise of a truly natural wilderness
- Modern society's technology, lifestyle and politics are only part of the problem
- The main issue is the character of human decision making, apparently rational decision making, over the last few thousand years

Rousseau's noble savage is truly a myth. And the modern world is not a radical break with history. This is a modernist myth of our contemporary uniqueness.

Jared Diamond has covered some of the same arguments in his recent book Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed – Viking, 2004.

But I find Diamond's archaeology is weak and he relies heavily on contemporary ethnographic and historical examples. Chuck Redman is far more convincing. But look at what Jared Diamond said to the Sierra Club (May/June issue 2005 page 45) (Thanks to Jonathan Greenberg for the reference):

Pat Joseph: Sierra Club Magazine – In "Collapse" you write that the world now finds itself in an "exponentially accelerating horse race" between environmental damage and environmental countermeasures. What gives you the hope that the race may turn out well?

Jared Diamond – Well, the main thing that gives me hope is the media. We have radio, TV, magazines, and books, so we have the possibility of learning from societies that are remote from us, like Somalia.

Also, we’ve got archaeologists. The Maya didn’t have archaeologists. We have at least the potential to learn from past societies. No other society in the world’s history has had that opportunity.