

Did Easter Island get 'ratted' out?

Hordes of rodents deforested island, researchers say

By Dan Vergano
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Rats and Europeans are likely to blame for the mysterious demise of Easter Island, a team of anthropologists suggests.

The fate of the people who built hundreds of 10-ton stone statues on the South Pacific island and then vanished has long been seen as a cautionary environmental tale. Natives deforested the island paradise to transport the statues, the story goes, triggering erosion that damaged farmlands. And then they supposedly bumped themselves off in a cannibalistic civil war in about 1650.

But anthropologist Terry Hunt of the University of Hawaii at Manoa first blames the Polynesian rat. The rats probably deforested the 66-square-mile island's 16 million palm trees. "Palm tree seeds are flet mignon to rats," Hunt says.

Working with colleagues at the island's anthropology museum and elsewhere since 2001, Hunt's team has undertaken an extensive archaeological survey of the island:

- Charcoal remains show that Polynesians settled the island in 1200, much later than supposed from earlier, inaccurate dates of such deposits.
- Pollen and ash deposits show that the number of palm trees declined swiftly in the years before



By Martin Bernetti, AFP/Getty Images

Mystery solved? The population of Easter Island, famed for its gigantic statues, disappeared around 400 years ago. Now, researchers say rats deforested the island, and Dutch traders brought diseases and took away slaves.

fires, the signature of human occupation, appeared on the island.

- Rat remains indicate that the rodent population spiked at 20 million from 1200 to 1300 and then dropped off to a mere 1 million after the trees were gone.
- Skeletal remains and digs of old homes show little or no evidence of early warfare.

Instead, the disappearance of Easter Islanders probably was caused by visiting Dutch traders in the 1700s, who brought diseases and, later, slave raiding, says Hunt,

who presented his findings at an American Anthropological Association meeting last week.

Older explanations essentially blamed the victims for their demise, says archaeologist Patricia McAnany of Boston University. The island still represents a cautionary tale, she says, but one of the dangers of invasive species.

But New Zealand's John Flenley of Massey University calls the idea "most unlikely," saying rats didn't deforest other Polynesian islands. Hunt counters that deforestation

of palm trees by Polynesian rats occurred on the Hawaiian islands. And the Easter Island palms were uniquely vulnerable because the rats had no predators and the trees didn't grow at elevations too high for them to reach.

Hunt suggests that about 50 settlers first landed on the island and grew to a stable population of at least 3,000 people by 1650. That seems reasonable, says mathematician William Basener of the Rochester (N.Y.) Institute of Technology, an expert in population models.

Court showdown today over military recruiting

Campus free-speech debate intensifies

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

A question before the U.S. Supreme Court today is whether colleges' free-speech rights are violated by a law that could allow the government to withhold money from schools that limit military recruiters' access to campus.

Education

But even as the justices consider whether the law violates the First Amendment, anti-war groups say administrators on campuses nationwide are infringing on students' rights to protest.

Six students at Hampton University in Virginia were assigned to do community service for their role in a demonstration last month against the Bush administration and the war in Iraq. Seven had faced expulsion; none was expelled, university officials said Friday.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is investigating whether a student anti-war group vandalized property and intimidated people outside the Military Science building. Students were told they could be expelled.

Campus police clashed with counter-recruitment activists this semester at Holyoke Community College in Massachusetts and Harold Washington College in Chicago. And campus police at Kent State in Ohio and George Mason University in Virginia each apprehended a student protesting military recruiters,

though disciplinary actions against those students were dropped or canceled.

Though those cases represent extremes, "lots of students have to deal with lots of red tape" to organize rallies or protests, says Chris Schwartz, 25, a senior political science major at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls and a member of the Campus Anti-War Network (CAN), which has members on about 100 campuses.

Today, CAN members plan local actions tied to the court case, in which a group representing about 30 law schools argues that current law forces schools that want federal funding to accept the Pentagon's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which allows gays to serve in the armed forces only if they keep their sexual orientation to themselves. Because that conflicts with anti-discrimination policies on many campuses, the group argues, the schools' free-speech rights are violated.

On campuses where students face reprimands, administrators say they're not stifling speech. In a statement Friday, Hampton University officials said the students were punished for failing to register a protest. "The University certainly permits peaceful protests; however, all policies and procedures must be adhered to," the statement said.

The UW says investigating a complaint is standard procedure. Paul Pryse, 19, a UW sophomore facing discipline, doubts he'll be expelled. Still, he says, any rebuke has a chilling effect. "They're trying to send a warning that we should pipe down, back off."

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USA TODAY Crossword Edited by Timothy Parker

AFFIRMATIVE

By Diane C. Baldwin

ACROSS

- French door component
- Catamount
- del Sol, Spain
- Superior neighbor
- Past one's prime, perhaps
- Building support
- Exasperated OK
- Like Arctic winters
- Heroic tales
- Wee hour
- Musical sensitivity
- Bear's hunting method
- Roman tyrant
- Serenity spoiler
- Likewise
- Word with coach or home
- Talent broker
- Agreeable answer
- Wasn't kidding about
- Kind of heat
- Get off the fence
- Expressed delight verbally
- Drum out
- On the other hand
- Diary of sorts
- Luuu food
- Pest for a rose
- Motive for action
- Enthusiastic response
- Family of offspring
- Frosted
- fixe
- Knockout's opposite
- On one's own
- Egghead sort, stereotypically

DOWN

- Type of ticket
- Francis of "What's My Line?"
- Famous horse
- Word in a James Jones title
- Spectacular shows
- Exclamation of disgust
- Dole (out)
- Adjusts to conform
- Sorceress of Greek myth
- More than large
- Word in "America, the Beautiful"

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68								69				70	

- Very small amount
- Carter or Grant
- Blood pressure raiser
- It was circulated in San Marino
- Gambrel or mansard
- New couple in the news
- Worst market share
- Stumped
- Arabian gulf
- Coffee choice
- Baseball legend Mel, "The Little Giant"
- Counselors' org.
- Greek sandwich
- MIT word
- Destructive emotion
- Coward of note
- Legendary treasure city
- Breadbasket
- Diamond Head's site
- Egyptian deity
- Positive aspect
- OK fellow?
- Slightly colored
- Synthetic fabric
- Certain lyric poem
- Hair controller
- Art
- Related
- Major network
- Hockey legend Bobby
- Try to win over
- Aviv, Israel

Monday's Puzzle Answer

A	M	A	T	I	P	E	S	T	S	L	O	D	
P	A	N	I	C	O	M	A	H	A	E	S	E	
T	A	K	E	B	Y	S	T	O	R	M	T	S	P
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W	I	T	C	O	M	P	U	T	E	R	B	U	S
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