

# Easter Island (Rapa Nui): Recent Research Resolves Many Mysteries

## College of Humanities – Humanities Seminars

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19 September to 24 October, Tuesdays 2:00-4:00pm

Course Modality: Hybrid (in-person and online simultaneously)

### *Course Description*

In “**Easter Island (Rapa Nui): Recent Research Resolves Many Mysteries**” we will critically examine what we know about Rapa Nui’s spectacular archaeological history. Over the past two decades intensive multi-disciplinary research, much of it led by the instructor, has dramatically transformed our understanding of this remarkable and often misunderstood island.

Rapa Nui, has become widely known as a case study of human-induced environmental catastrophe resulting in cultural collapse. The island’s alleged tragic history is offered as a cautionary tale of our own environmental recklessness and flirtation with catastrophe on a global scale. However, a closer look at the actual archaeological and historical record for the island reveals that while an ecological transformation unfolded, the ancient Polynesians adapted and persisted. Indeed, the ancient islanders succeeded despite the odds.

In this course, we review the evidence for Polynesian migrations and ancient American connections. We will examine Rapa Nui archaeology in detail, including how the massive statues (*moai*) were transported to every part of the island. And how did they place multi-ton “hats” (*pukao*) atop the giant statues? We go on to consider deforestation, climate, and the constraints ancient islanders faced. Then our attention turns to the island’s ancient population, resilience, and social life. We will conclude our class contemplating Rapa Nui’s contemporary problems and future challenges.

### *Modality*

Our course will be hybrid: in person and online simultaneously. We will meet in six live/hybrid sessions on Tuesdays from 2:00 to 4:00 pm.

## ***Instructor***

Professor **Terry Hunt** is an internationally renowned anthropologist, archaeologist, and educator. Dr. Hunt is one of the world's foremost experts on the human and environmental histories of the Pacific Islands, where he has conducted field research for more than four decades. Dr. Hunt has conducted field research over the past 22 years on Rapa Nui (Easter Island), where he has engaged many students in this work. His current and continuing field research collaboration on Rapa Nui is funded by the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation.

Dr. Hunt is the co-author of *The Statues That Walked: Unraveling the Mystery of Easter Island*, with Carl Lipo, which details Rapa Nui's archaeological history. The book won the Society for American Archaeology's Book of the Year award in the public audience category in 2011. Dr. Hunt's research was the focus of a National Geographic magazine cover story in July 2012 and a Nova-National Geographic TV documentary that first aired on PBS in November 2012. In February (2023) Dr. Hunt joined host Michael Strahan and *Good Morning America* featuring his research on the island. His work and that of his colleagues continues to receive high profile press coverage.

Dr. Hunt is Professor in the School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. He previously served as W.A. Franke Dean, W.A. Franke Honors College, here at University of Arizona. Dr. Hunt is W.A. Franke Dean Emeritus. He previously served as Dean of the Clark Honors College, University of Oregon, and taught at University of Hawai'i-Manoa for 25 years.

## ***Recommended Reading***

Participants in the course may wish to read in advance *The Statues that Walked: Unraveling the Mystery of Easter Island*, Terry L. Hunt and Carl P. Lipo (2011), Free Press-Simon & Schuster, for an overview and background to the course content. The book is available for purchase on Amazon. Other readings will be distributed electronically.

## ***Class Schedule and Recommended Readings***

### **September 19: Polynesian Migrations and Rapa Nui Origins**

Reading:

"The last great migration: Human colonisation of the remote Pacific Islands"  
(2017), T.L. Hunt, C.P. Lipo, In: N. Boivin, Crassard, R., and Petraglia, M.D.,  
Editors, *Human Dispersal and Species Movement - From Prehistory to the  
Present* (pp. 194-216), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

## September 26: Rapa Nui Archaeology

Reading:

"The Archaeology of Rapa Nui (Easter Island)" (2018) T.L. Hunt, C.P. Lipo, In E.E. Cochrane and T.L. Hunt, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Oceanic Prehistory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 416-449.

## October 3: Deforestation: Causes and Consequences ("Collapse?")

Reading:

*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. (2005) J. Diamond, Penguin U.S.A.  
(Chapter Two: Twilight at Easter).

"Ecological catastrophe, collapse, and the myth of 'ecocide' on Rapa Nui (Easter Island)" (2009), T.L. Hunt, C.P. Lipo, In P.A. McAnany and N. Yoffee, Editors, *Questioning Collapse: Human resilience, ecological vulnerability, and the aftermath of empire*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 21-44.

"Rethinking Easter Island's ecological catastrophe" (2007), T.L. Hunt, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 34:485-502.

## October 10: *Moai* (statue) Making and Transport; *Pukao* transport and placement

Reading:

"The 'walking' megalithic statues of Easter Island" (2012) C.P. Lipo, T.L. Hunt, S. Rapu-Haoa, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 40:2859-2866.

"The Colossal Hats of Monumental Statues: An analysis of *pukao* variability on Rapa Nui (Easter Island): Analyses of *pukao* variability, transport, and emplacement" (2018) S.W. Hixon, C.P. Lipo, T.L. Hunt, C. Lee, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 100:148-157.

## October 17: Ancient Rapa Nui Competition, Cooperation, Resilience

Reading:

"Triumph of the Commons: Sustainable community practices on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) (2021), R.J. DiNapoli, C.P. Lipo, T.L. Hunt, *Sustainability* 13, 12118.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su132112118>.

"The ethnohistory of freshwater use on Rapa Nui (Easter Island, Chile)" (2019) R.J. DiNapoli, S. Hixon, T.L. Hunt, C.P. Lipo, *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 128(2): 163-189.

"Rapa Nui (Easter Island) monument (*ahu*) locations explained by freshwater sources" (2019) R.J. DiNapoli, C.P. Lipo, T. Brosnan, T.L. Hunt, S. W. Hixon, A.E. Morrison, M. Becker, *PLOS-One* 14(1): e0210409.

## October 24: Overview and Rapa Nui's Contemporary Problems, Future Challenges

Film:

*Eating Up Easter* (in class)