



A Short History of Progress

Ronald Wright

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Each time history repeats itself, the cost goes up. The twentieth century—a time of unprecedented progress—has produced a tremendous strain on the very elements that comprise life itself: This raises the key question of the twenty-first century: How much longer can this go on? With wit and erudition, Ronald Wright lays out a convincing case that history has always provided an answer, whether we care to notice or not. From Neanderthal man to the Sumerians to the Roman Empire, *A Short History of Progress* dissects the cyclical nature of humanity's development and demise, the 10,000-year old experiment that we've unleashed but have yet to control. It is Wright's contention that only by understanding and ultimately breaking from the patterns of progress and disaster that humanity has repeated around the world since the Stone Age can we avoid the onset of a new Dark Age. Wright illustrates how various cultures throughout history have literally manufactured their own end by producing an overabundance of innovation and stripping bare the very elements that allowed them to initially advance. Wright's book is brilliant; a fascinating rumination on the hubris at the heart of human development and the pitfalls we still may have time to avoid.

A Short History of Progress Details

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Luise says

Sadly this book is as relevant as when it was published, and even more urgently needed.

Hadrian says

Short tract on the hazards of unlimited growth with limited resources, exploitation of the masses and nature, colonialism, monoculture, etc. Vivid preaching rhetoric, but unfortunately leaves no hints of real solutions except some fuzzy 'power to the masses' stuff, and an emphasis on 'long-term thinking'. All of which are sound ideas, but it's up to other people for their implementation.

Time to get to business.

Claire says

I picked up this as part of my reading around the idea of History as progress for our scholarship program at school this year.

Wright's text tackles the key question- where are we going? His base argument is that civilisation makes the same mistakes over and over again. Wright identifies what he terms "progress traps"- actions and developments which provide short term benefits but are ultimately evolutionarily unsustainable- they are dead ends.

I thought that Wright presented this argument clearly- drawing on a number of sound examples to support this theory. In some sense, this was quite a bleak book to read. Ultimately, Wright really issues a call to arms- we must change our system or perish by it.

Trevor says

I got a new friend on Good Reads the other day and glanced down her favourite quotes and spotted two quotes from this book – from the 2003 Massey Lectures. I'm quite fond of the Messey lectures as they are often really very good. Not all that different (in quality or style) from the Reith Lectures in Britain or even Australia's very own Boyer Lectures (whose name I've spent the last couple of days trying to remember – a bit embarrassing that, when you think of it). This one was really very interesting – a bit like a cross between Collapse and Germs, Guns and Steel, if shorter and sometimes funnier.

The argument is pretty simple – we humans tend to make pretty much the same mistakes with this civilisation thing over and over again. He refers to these mistakes as 'progress traps'. A really nice example of progress traps is the idea that it is great to build a village beside a river, but a pretty stupid idea to build a city beside one. It is a good idea for a village as the land beside the river generally has excellent soil for growing food. But villages tend to become cities by building and paving over what was once our best farming land. Bit of a mistake that, really. This problem is only made worse when we need to feed more

people and to do that by growing food on what is increasingly more marginal land.

Do you know when someone says something and suddenly a whole series of ideas that you've known forever suddenly snap into place? That happened here when he talked about the relationship between rivers and salinity. Here is what I already knew. One of the first extinction events in the history of our planet occurred when trees first started growing. They broke up the soil and it was this that released salts into rivers that then flowed into the seas. After a while (a very long while) this caused oceans to become increasingly salty and that subtle and slow acting change killed off many of the biota (I've been wanting to use that word for ages) living on the planet, causing one of the first mass extinction events.

What I hadn't thought of was the idea that rivers (which we generally think of as being filled with 'fresh' water) are actually the source of salt water. Except, clearly I did sort of know this before, I just didn't really understand all of the implications. Now, what I learnt from this book was that one of the things we humans do (one of the progress traps we find ourselves in) is to use rivers to irrigate our fields. We channel what is deceptively mostly fresh water (with tiny amounts of salt) onto our fields where we grow our food. The water evaporates and leaves behind tiny amount of salt – repeat this process with abandon over a couple of hundreds of years and the field stops being able to produce food anymore.

He also discusses the other little problem we have with food – the fact that animals that only eat one kind of food generally end up extinct when something bad happens to that particular food type – think Giant Panda or Koala or Humans. We like to think of ourselves as omnivores, but in fact, our food of choice, despite appearances, is oil. We use it to grow all of the other foods we eat (super nitrate anyone?) and to transport our food from distant fields to supermarkets to kitchen. When the oil runs out we have much more to lose than just the convenience of getting from here to there in a SUV with only ourselves on board.

Comparisons are made here with the collapse of other civilisations that have existed along the way and the remarkably common features each of these collapses had. Generally these involved people living beyond their means, fouling their own nests and then finding that nature doesn't always come 'roaring back again'.

The book ends with something that I've been becoming increasingly concerned about over the last little while. It is the idea that what is most likely to presage collapse is the increasing inequity of the distribution of the wealth of society. This was true, it seems, of the collapse of the Mayans, also the less than happy folk of Easter Island, of Rome and the frighteningly close and all too recent 'end of the world event' we had in the Great Depression.

It seems that wealth distribution tends to become absurdly unequal as things become increasingly dire and precarious for civilisation. And with increasing greed comes increasing unconcern ('no, that's fine, cut down the last tree, pull out the last fish, hunt the last whale – God will provide, bring on the end times, science will fix things') until beyond the time when we have gone too far. On a planet where we are quickly and quietly heading towards a population of seven billion people with stagnant (perhaps even diminishing) food production, maybe now is a good time to start thinking about if our practices are sustainable long term what we can do about them if they are not.

Instead we seem to be doing quite the opposite, gorging ourselves with both hands. And talk about inequitable distribution. As he says here, at the time of writing the richest three people in the world owned as much as the bottom 48 countries. Has there ever been a time in human history when such incomprehensible inequity existed? I've been surprised by how often, in discussion inequity of this scale with Americans on various internet sites, that I'm told that I wouldn't understand freedom as I live in a socialist country. Firstly, Australia is about as close to being a socialist country as my arse is to being a sharpshooter – and secondly, what sort of freedom is it where one person has everything and everyone else sees their wealth diminishing towards nothing? He explains this paradox by quoting a line of Steinbeck: "Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat, but as temporality embarrassed

millionaires.”

This book seeks to provide comfort by the thought that we have lived through these kinds of collapses before and that we can therefore finally learn from past errors and change enough this time so as to avert catastrophe. I guess you can almost smell the error in that little piece of logic – the all too dismally apparent fact that the one thing we never learn from is history – particularly ‘other people’s history’. So, although this book isn’t unremittingly depressing, it comes fairly close. I recommend it all the same.

Keith Akers says

I read this book about 10 years ago (in 2005) and it greatly impressed me. In some ways, this is the book that Jared Diamond should have written instead of *Collapse* — it’s much shorter and punchier. It doesn’t have the same sort of detail and case histories that Diamond has, but he keeps the reader’s interest with his vivid writing and the sweep of the spectacle which he depicts.

His prevailing image is that of "progress traps" such as befell Mesopotamia and the Maya. The wrecks of our failed experiments in civilization lie scattered in deserts and jungles like crashed airliners; if we can recover the "flight recorders" we can tell what went wrong and avoid it. He also cites relatively stable civilizations such as those in Egypt and China. "The greatest wonder of the ancient world is how recent it all is. No city or monument is much more than 5,000 years old" (p. 55).

The main examples he relies on are Sumeria, Rome, the Maya, and Easter Island. He distinguishes between true collapses and political upheavals like the French and Russian revolutions — the exhaustion of social, rather than natural, capital. When nature starts to foreclose, the social contract breaks down. "Such a civilization is therefore most unstable at its peak, when it has reached maximum demand on the ecology. Unless a new source of wealth or energy appears, it has no room left to raise production or absorb the shock of natural fluctuations. The only way onward is to keep wringing new loans from nature and humanity" (p. 84).

I’m not sure of all of his details. He says that "Rome’s ancient breadbaskets are filled with sand and dust" (p. 94). It’s true that much of North Africa has been turned to desert in the past 3000 years, but my impression was that this was due to Arab herdsmen and pastoralists who came in after the fall of Rome. There is probably some truth to the idea that Rome was weakened already through environmental damage, and perhaps Joseph Tainter underestimates the impact of the environment on Rome’s fall, but I’d like a little more detail on this point before concluding that the fall of Rome as due primarily to environmental causes. Tainter makes a good case that inflation of Rome's currency was a key factor. The last Roman emperor was deposed not after a dramatic battle but when he couldn't pay his troops.

This is an excellent book. This guy can write, so it's a quick and entertaining read. He marshals his evidence quickly and convincingly, and the dominant image he leaves — of our civilization facing a crisis similar to that which faced other ancient civilizations — is one that simply cannot be dismissed.

Clif says

This book is short and quickly read.

It was written in 2005, the same year that Jared Diamond wrote the far more detailed and penetrating account of failed societies, *Collapse*. Having read Diamond's book, Wright's work seems very light weight, more of a quick overview with some valuable insight offered.

Wright has a very appealing way with words and I found myself saying "that's right!" many times.

Take this example:

"John Steinbeck once said that socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. This helps explain why American culture is so hostile to the idea of limits, why voters during the last energy shortage rejected the sweater-wearing Jimmy Carter and elected Ronald Reagan, who scoffed at conservation and told them it was still "morning in America". Nowhere does the myth of progress have more fervent believers."

His idea is that societies box themselves in by their technologies and become incapable of changing even when there is clear evidence that what they do cannot be sustained. Like Diamond, he offers up the Maya and the Easter Islanders, but his point is general and he points out that hunting and gathering could not support more than a limited human population until farming came to the rescue.

Wright attempts to look at the characteristics of human civilization per se - what do all societies have in common that can help us see where we are headed? One common thread is the movement of wealth to the top with the result that the powers that be will always want to keep things as they are to keep their benefits flowing.

The book is filled with interesting factoids to stop you in your tracks: it took 19 centuries after the fall of Rome to add 200 million people to the population of the world. Now it takes only three years to add this number.

It took from the dawn of time to 1825 for the human population of the Earth to reach 1 billion. We now add 1 billion in 12 years.

Having read this book, Diamond's *Collapse*, and recently Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, I have to ponder if modern man has opened a Pandora's box with science and technology. For hundreds of thousands of years humanity was in stasis as just another form of animal. Now, seemingly empowered without limit, I wonder about the old story of the person who, questioned why he wants to climb a mountain, answers "because it's there". Humans have always been driven - it comes with being a form of life. Life in itself is driven to survive.

Wright wonders if we can find out something about ourselves by looking at the behavior of past generations and then consider where we are going ("progress"). I wonder if we have any choice...pushing on is just something that we do regardless of the consequences...and we laud it as "the human spirit".

For a very quick read on the topic, get this book. For the nitty gritty, scholarly, fascinatingly detailed, yet tragic accounts of cultures mentioned by Wright and more, read *Collapse* by Jared Diamond. This book is a caution, so is Diamond's book, but that book is heartbreaking as well because in its detail it really brings the humanity of ancient cultures home.

Holly says

A solid, information-filled history of human civilizations and their downfalls or demises, in just 132 pages of text and 54 pages of substantive endnotes. I had wondered whether the 2004 publication date would make a difference, but except for some new discoveries in the paleontological record of Neanderthals, it really does not, since this is a big-picture, panoramic long-view study. Interesting that this could be read as a sort of condensed version of Diamond's *Collapse* - but I think Wright took a swipe at Diamond - can't find the reference now and he's in the biblio. but not the index.

While listening to Krista Tippett's book a few days ago I heard Richard Rodriguez talk about visiting the desolate deserts of the Middle East's Holy Lands, and coming to a deep realization of the significance of that lonely desert landscape in the origin of monotheism and emergence of three world religions. It was persuasive in a sort of woo-woo way and I didn't think about it too critically. Reading Wright's book reminded that it was once *fertile* crescent of marshes and waterways, irrigation and agriculture, that became desert through a combination of climate change and misuse/overuse. There is a lesson there that is important not to forget.

Richard Reese says

Every year, Canadians eagerly huddle around their radios to listen to the Massey Lectures, broadcast by the CBC. For the 2004 season, Ronald Wright was the honored speaker. He presented a series of five lectures, titled *A Short History of Progress*. In 2005, Wright's presentation was published as a short book, and it became a bestseller. Martin Scorsese's movie, *Surviving Progress*, was based on the book.

It was an amazing success for a story contrary to our most holy cultural myths. Wright believed that the benefits of progress were highly overrated, because of their huge costs. Indeed, progress was approaching the point of becoming a serious threat to the existence of humankind. "This new century will not grow very old before we enter an age of chaos and collapse that will dwarf all the dark ages in our past."

He pointed out that the world was dotted with the ruins of ancient crash sites, civilizations that self-destructed. At each of these wrecks, modern science can, in essence, retrieve the "black box," and discover why the mighty society crashed and burned. There is a clear pattern. Each one crashed because it destroyed what it depended on for its survival.

Wright takes us on a quick tour of the collapse of Sumer, Easter Island, the Roman Empire, and the Mayans. He explains why the two oddballs, China and Egypt, are taking longer than average to self-destruct. The fatal defects of agriculture and civilization are old news for the folks who have been paying attention. It has become customary for these folks to believe that "The Fall" took place when humans began to domesticate plants and animals.

Wright thinks the truth is more complicated. What makes this book unique and provocative is his notion of progress traps. The benefits of innovation often encourage society to live in a new way, while burning the bridges behind them as they advance. Society can find itself trapped in an unsustainable way of living, and it's no longer possible to just turn around and painlessly return to a simpler mode. Like today, we know that the temporary bubble of cheap energy is about over, and our entire way of life is dependent on cheap energy. We're trapped.

Some types of progress do not disrupt the balance of the ecosystem, like using a rock to crack nuts. But our ability to stand upright freed our hands for working with tools and weapons, which launched a million year

process of experimentation and innovation that gradually snowballed over time.

We tend to assume that during the long era of hunting and gathering our ancestors were as mindful as the few hunting cultures that managed to survive on the fringes into the twentieth century. But in earlier eras, when big game was abundant, wise stewardship was not mandatory. Sloppy tribes could survive — for a while.

Before they got horses, Indians of the American west would drive herds of buffalo off cliffs, killing many at a time. They took what they needed, and left the rest for legions of scavengers. One site in Colorado contained the carcasses of 152 buffalo. A trader in the northern Rockies witnessed about 250 buffalo being killed at one time. Wright mentioned two Upper Paleolithic sites I had not heard of — 1,000 mammoth skeletons were found at Piedmont in the Czech Republic, and the remains of over 100,000 horses were found at Solutré in France.

Over time, progress perfected our hunting systems. Our supply of high-quality food seemed to be infinite. It was our first experience of prosperity and leisure. Folks had time to take their paint sets into caves and do gorgeous portraits of the animals they lived with, venerated, killed, and ate.

Naturally, our population grew. More babies grew up to be hunters, and the availability of game eventually decreased. The grand era of cave painting ended, and we began hunting rabbits. We depleted species after species, unconsciously gliding into our first serious progress trap.

Some groups scrambled to find alternatives, foraging around beaches, estuaries, wetlands, and bogs. Some learned how to reap the tiny seeds of wild grasses. By and by, the end of the hunting way of life came into view, about 10,000 years ago. “They lived high for a while, then starved.”

Having destroyed the abundant game, it was impossible to return to simpler living. This was a progress trap, and it led directly into a far more dangerous progress trap, the domestication of plants and animals. Agriculture and civilization were accidents, and they threw open the gateway to 10,000 years of monotony, drudgery, misery, and ecocide. Wright says that civilization is a pyramid scheme; we live today at the expense of those who come after us.

For most of human history, the rate of progress was so slow that it was usually invisible. But the last six or seven generations have been blindsided by a typhoon of explosive change. Progress has a habit of giving birth to problems that can only be solved by more progress. Progress was the most diabolically wicked curse you could ever imagine. Maybe we should turn it into an insulting obscenity: “progress you!”

Climate scientists have created models showing weather trends over the last 250,000 years, based on ice cores. Agriculture probably didn't start earlier because climate trends were unstable. Big swings could take place over the course of decades. In the last 10,000 years, the climate has been unusually stable. A return to instability will make civilization impossible.

Joseph Tainter studied how civilizations collapse, and he described three highways to disaster: the Runaway Train (out-of-control problems), the Dinosaur (indifference to dangers), and the House of Cards (irreversible disintegration). He predicted that the next collapse would be global in scale.

Finally, the solution: “The reform that is needed is... simply the transition from short-term thinking to long-term.” Can we do it?

We are quite clever, but seldom wise, according to Wright. Ordinary animals, like our ancestors, had no need for long-term thinking, because life was always lived in the here and now. “Free Beer Tomorrow” reads the flashing neon sign on the tavern, but we never exist in tomorrow.

The great news is that we now possess a mountain of black boxes. For the first time in the human journey, a growing number of people comprehend our great mistakes, and are capable of envisioning a new path that eventually abandons our embarrassing boo-boos forever. All the old barriers to wisdom and healing have been swept away (in theory).

Everywhere you look these days; people are stumbling around staring at tiny screens and furiously typing — eagerly communicating with world experts, engaging in profound discussions, watching videos rich with illuminating information, and reading the works of green visionaries. It's a magnificent sight to behold — the best is yet to come!

Charlotte says

REQUIRED READING for every human being. A very succinct and straightforward account of how civilizations rise and fall. The basic premise is that humans usually outstrip their natural resources, making their society unstable. Civil unrest and natural disasters ensue that kill off most of the civilians and lead to the downfall of the civilization itself. Can we say "Rome" anybody?

The author is hopeful that we homo sapiens can learn from the mistakes of the past and begin conserving our resources. As he puts it, this has nothing to do with one's political or economical opinions. It is simply transitioning from short-term to long-term thinking.

You may have a pessimistic week while reading this one, but if you're the type who would choose the red pill over the blue pill then you must read this book.

Rachel says

I want all of you to read this book.

ALL OF YOU.

It covers the most compelling issue facing our planet- the runaway train of unsustainable living we project on this world's resources.

This isn't an anti-American, anti-Capitalist, anti-Christian, or even deep-environmentalist message. This is purely about making sure our grandchildren have clean water, clean air, viable agricultural land to support themselves, and healthy lifestyles that can escape pandemics.

Wright compiled an excellent synthesis of archaeological, evolutionary, economic, social, medical, and environmental information through case studies of past civilizations that have failed. Whether it was from killing off all the big game by hunting unsustainably (early Homo sapiens), allowing topsoil to erode by using unsustainable agricultural practices leaving the society vulnerable to debilitating natural disasters (Sumerian flood that was the basis for the Noah's Ark myth), destroying the natural resources of a region until there is nothing left to support the society (the people of Easter Island)- we are not strangers to full civilization collapse. The difference is that these societies fell while another took their place by utilizing unspoiled natural regions. Now, we have filled every inch of useful land and are plundering it unsustainably.

Policies and practice must change if we hope to maintain our prosperity and "progress".

Renee says

Ronald Wright bases his book/lecture series around three seemingly simple, yet profound questions that have haunted human beings since time began.

'Where did we come from?'

'What are we?'

'Where are we going?'

If you have any curiosity about the answers to these questions, don't hesitate to pick up 'A Short history of progress'.

From these three questions, Wright takes us on a whirlwind tour of human history, from the dawn of humanity to the present day.

By answering the first two questions, Wright seeks to answer to third and most difficult question, 'Where are we going?'. Unsurprisingly, the outlook is bleak. Wright predicts that our society will collapse like so many other ancient civilisations, Easter Island and Sumerian society being the most prominent examples, but on a much grander scale. To avoid the downfall of our civilisation, we must wake up and realise that we can no longer afford to repeat history.

What sets Wright apart from other historians is his talent for compressing so much into so little time, while preserving the essence of his material. His biting wit, skill with language and dry sense of humour make his lectures a pleasure to listen to (contrast to the average university lecture!). Wright's book, despite the breadth of its subject matter, is extremely readable. Compared to Jared Diamond's verbose works, 'A Short History' is accessible to even the least academically inclined among us.

M.J. says

In 2001, Ronald Wright was selected to give the 2004 Massey Lectures on CBC. "A Short History of Progress" was his attempt to answer three questions posed by the painter Gauguin: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Unlike the last few books I've read, I can't give it an unhesitating endorsement. As the title suggests, it is short at 132 pages, but it took me nearly 3 weeks to finish. Part of that is because it has been a busy couple of weeks, but the lion's share is that I didn't feel the impetus to go back to the book once I put it down. It didn't catch me as other books on the subject did; I read to enjoy the well-written phrases the author linked together in his warning, but there seemed little more than that.

"A Short History of Progress" is an appetizer. It is well-written, but lacks substance. Following Jared Diamond's excellent books, perhaps this was inevitable. This is a book that would serve as a wonderful introduction to someone newly introduced to our history and the impact it is having on our future, but those looking for more depth would be advised to seek out something more akin to the main course.

Ozgur Baltat says

Herleminin K?sa Tarihi'nin yan?t arad??? sorular; Nereden geliyoruz? Neyiz? Nereye Gidiyoruz?. Yan?tlar? ararken izledi?i yol, insanl?k tarihinin ge?mi? medeniyet deneyimleri. Paskalya Adalar?, S?merler, M?s?rl?lar, Mayalar, Romal?lar, ?inliler, M?s?rl?lar ve di?erleri. Ne yapt?lar da bu medeniyetler son buldu? ??k?lerin ortak y?nleri nelerdi : Kontrolde ??km?? Tren, Dinazor ve ?skambilden kule. Peki ya ?imdi, nereye gidiyoruz? Medeniyetimizin bulundu?u noktada bunlar?n t?m?nden fazlas?yla var. Uyan?n!

Jamie says

I feel like I learned a lot and had my understanding of civilization blown wide open. I can't believe how clean, smart, and clear this read was. If I had skipped the footnotes, I think I could have read the whole thing in an afternoon. It's really a series of lectures, and you can listen to the whole thing on YouTube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsPMaG...>

Vince says

Using historical data accumulated through archaeological investigations (physical and climatic) over the last couple of hundred years, Wright gives a concise examination of how civilizations (all agriculturally based) inevitably collapse. The details vary depending on a variety of conditions (ecological, climatic, external pressures, a combination of forces). The emphasis is on resultant complexity as technological development advances and the ultimate growth of a hierarchical class system which generates additional internal pressures contributing to the big fail (e.g. unequal wealth distribution, large military). Wright calls these "progress traps". Some wax and wane over a relatively long period (Egypt, China), while others go down quickly. But fall they do. For greater detail Joseph Tainter is the go-to-guy. See, for example 'The Collapse of Complex Societies' (hard to find) or lots of YouTube lectures.

Spicy T AKA Mr. Tea says

What an amazing book. I actually heard about this while driving back to Rochester through Buffalo one night. The author was selected as the Massey Lecturer for Canada and was on the CBC basically reading the first chapter from his book. I was fucken mesmerized. The signal finally broke and I found the book and immediately read it. I've never really read any radical anthropology with the exception of David Graeber among a few others, but his writing style was totally accessible and invigorating and his conclusions were immense--things I've never heard. I'll never forget his discussion of Gauguin's questions--who are we, where do we come from, where are we going. He used this as an analogy to create the conditions in which to explore the larger and more pressing social, historical, and biological question of "progress" and where it's taken the human species. I may need to read this book again really soon. I highly recommend it!

Nico Van Straalen says

"The human career divides in two: everything before the Neolithic Revolution and everything after it" is the phrase in the book I like quoting and it is indicative for Wright's very short treatise of the human story and his deconstruction of progress. Read this book and you learn about sapiens as much as from Harari's ten times more voluminous work.

Dierregi says

I read this book after "*Collapse*", so for me it was a sort of summary of what is described in detail in Jared Diamond's excellent book (even if Wright does not agree completely with Diamond). Basically, the human race is on the brink of destructing planet Earth, because of its greed and stupidity. Other societies already accomplished the task of self-destruction, but on smaller scale and isolated environments – such as the infamous Easter Island.

Nowadays, globalization means that humankind has the power to wipe out the whole of itself, not just small populations living on a tiny island in the middle of nowhere. This also thanks to neoliberal capitalism, which degrades nature into "*ecosystem service*" and the concept that "*everything can be seen in terms of economics*".

Unfortunately, it looks like the monkeys already started destroying the lab and nobody will stop them...

Magdelanye says

In crisp, accessible prose, RW reframes the notion of progress in this concise but sweeping assessment of the predicament of civilizations and the repetitive pattern of destruction.

Commencing with Gauguin's three apocryphal questions (where do we come from? what are we? Where are we going?) he commences to answer them in order to use this knowledge to "plot a wise course" for "the future of everything we have accomplished since intelligence evolved will depend on the wisdom of our actions over the next few years." p3

RW is not content to give an academic overview or merely bring together obscure historical observations and new findings. He is bold enough to reach inevitable conclusions and they are sobering. He notes: Terrorism is a small threat compared with hunger, disease, or climate change....terrorism cannot be stopped by addressing symptoms and not the cause. Violence is bred by injustice, poverty, inequality, and other violence....Of course a full belly and a fair hearing won't stop a fanatic, but they can greatly reduce the number who *become* fanatics. p126

"If we don't do these things now, while we prosper, we will never be able to do them when times get hard....Now is our last chance to get our future right." p132

Debbie says

This book should be compulsory reading for all world leaders. It is a collection of the lectures that Ronald Wright originally gave as part of the prestigious Canadian Massey Lecture series where an international scholar is invited to give a week long series of lectures on a political, cultural or philosophic topic.

Wright's chosen topic was the way in which advanced civilisations have historically and repeatedly destroyed themselves by becoming too successful and destroying the very environments that initially enabled them to flourish.

Wright uses historical case studies of Easter Island, Sumerian, Mayan and Roman civilisations as examples of extremely successful and advanced civilisations which exhausted their natural resources through greed and untrammled growth and paid the price. He argues that our global twentieth century civilisation is following the same pattern, but that the consequences for us will be far greater because of our huge population and inter connectedness. As he states, 'pesticides sprayed in China condense in Antarctic glaciers and Rocky Mountain tarns.'

While Wright's lectures are very sobering and scary, he offers the belief that we have the ability to turn things around because we can learn from the mistakes made by past civilisations and put in place the steps to avoid repeating them. I only wish I shared this belief. I think it highly unlikely that our world leaders will have the backbone to adopt the long term thinking needed to avoid the environmental crisis we are headed towards.

This is an extremely well argued and well written book that covers a subject of incredible relevance and topicality. Everybody should read this.
