

# Why Civilizations Fall

A new IMAX film delivers a stern warning: human survival depends on our protecting the web of life

By CHARLES P. ALEXANDER



SITTING COMFORTABLY in the climate-controlled, Internet-connected virtual world of a modern home, it's easy to feel independent of nature.

Fresh water flows from the faucet, food is minutes away at the supermarket, and the garbage gets carted off by obliging guys in smudged uniforms. Who cares if the spread of civilization is driving 100 or so animal and plant species to extinction every day? So what if we are overloading our atmosphere with enough carbon dioxide to parboil the plan-

delivers more: a message essential to our survival in the 21st century. Nature, we see in 90-ft. images, is one interconnected web with man right in the middle, and if we tear huge holes in it, the entire fabric could unravel.

For a lesson in unintended ecological consequences, we venture with the help of an underwater camera into the giant forest of kelp that anchors the marine ecosystem off the coast of California. Early last century, Ford explains, that world was all but destroyed—indirectly—by human activity. Hunters started the process by depleting the population of sea otters. With the otters gone, the population of their favorite food, the sea urchins, began expanding

Catskill mountain lake in upstate New York. The city, we see, will have a supply of clean water only as long as it protects its pristine Catskill reservoirs.

The highlight of the film is a helicopter ride to a world that is lost in the best sense of the word. Mount Roraima, which juts out of the rain forest in the southeast corner of Venezuela, is so remote that few humans have ever been there, much less had a chance to spoil its rugged beauty. There scientists find plants and animals that humans have never seen before, like a tiny frog that is unable to jump but can climb up the side of a gully to escape a scorpion. Could one of Mount Roraima's strange creatures harbor a cure for cancer or aids? Or will humans destroy this habitat before we find out?

The most haunting scenes are those that frame the movie—opening and closing shots of the ruins of the ancient city of Tikal in what is now Guatemala. Once the thriving heart of the Mayan empire, this metropolis was abruptly abandoned

## DID A DISREGARD FOR NATURE DOOM THE MAYAN EMPIRE?



**THEN** Through the magic of digital imaging, the movie re-creates Tikal as it might have looked about 1,000 years ago

**NOW** After it was abandoned, the metropolis disappeared into the tropical forest—until its ruins were unearthed a century ago

et? Can't we just crank up the air-conditioning a little higher?

If you think human societies can ignore nature and still prosper, you might want to see *Lost Worlds: Life in the Balance*, a new IMAX film narrated with quiet fervor by Harrison Ford. Produced by Canada's Primesco International with major backing from the National Science Foundation, *Lost Worlds* is now playing at New York City's American Museum of Natural History and will make its way to theaters around the world. Besides offering the breathtaking panoramas we've come to expect of IMAX movies, this one

unchecked. The urchins, in turn, devoured kelp until the ocean floor was virtually a wasteland. It was as if a fleet of loggers in submarines had come in and clear-cut the area. Only when otters were protected in the 1970s did the sea urchins retreat and the kelp return.

Even a steel-and-glass metropolis like New York City has direct links to nature that can't be safely broken. The movie really gets moving when the camera takes us on a high-speed thrill ride down a Manhattan faucet, through the inside of water mains, up dozens of miles of aqueducts until—glup, glup—we suddenly surface in a

1,000 years ago, its stone temples swallowed by the Central American jungle. No one knows for certain what happened to Tikal, but *Lost Worlds* puts forth the plausible theory that the Mayans stripped away the forest for miles around, exhausting their soil, food and water and succumbing to famine and warfare. "Did the people of Tikal lose their life-support system," asks Ford, "without every understanding it?" Will the same thing happen to modern cities? Maybe not, if we remember this admonition from *Lost Worlds*: "When we protect nature, we protect ourselves." ■

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