

The End

Talk about alarmist headlines. In March 2014, the *Guardian* ran this whopper: “Nasa-funded study: industrial civilization headed for ‘irreversible collapse?’” Similar headlines followed. The study in question was led by University of Maryland applied mathematician Safa Motesharri, and through it was financed in part by a grant from NASA, no one from NASA participated in the study. And they made that clear, stating, “NASA does not endorse the paper or its conclusions.”

Motesharri’s goal was to create a “universal model of social collapse” to explain why so many thriving civilizations—the Romans, the Mayans, the Mesopotamians—suddenly went kaput. He came up with four equations (full of strange symbols and Greek letters) that defined humans as “Predators”—divided into “Elites” and “Masses”—and nature as simply “Prey.” Because nature can’t be quantified, damage is measured in “Eco-dollars.” The study’s conclusion: “Given economic stratification, collapse is very difficult to avoid and requires major policy changes, including major reductions in inequality and population growth rates.”

The good news: a whole bevy of statisticians and scientists took Motesharri to task for his methodology (he provided no empirical evidence) and his overgeneralizing of complex systems. The bad news: Motesharri still might be right.