

May 1, 2005

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## MUSEUMS

## Exhibiting the right stuff

## "Collapse?"

**Where:** Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 900 Exposition Blvd., Los Angeles

**When:** 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

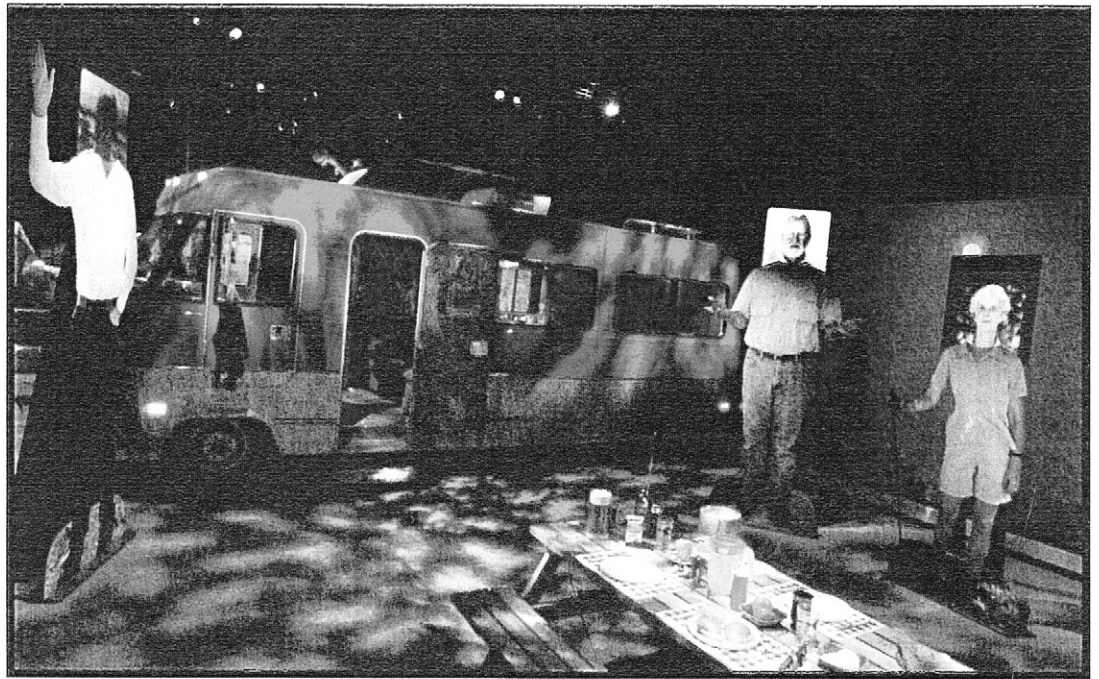
**Ends:** Jan. 15, 2006

**Price:** \$9 adults; \$6.50 students and seniors; \$2 children ages 5 to 12

**Contact:** (213) 763-3466;  
www.nhm.org

Presenting 'Collapse?' was a curating challenge. It's not easy to make environmental crises fun for the whole family.

By Suzanne Muchnic  
Times Staff Writer



GLENN KOENIG Los Angeles Times

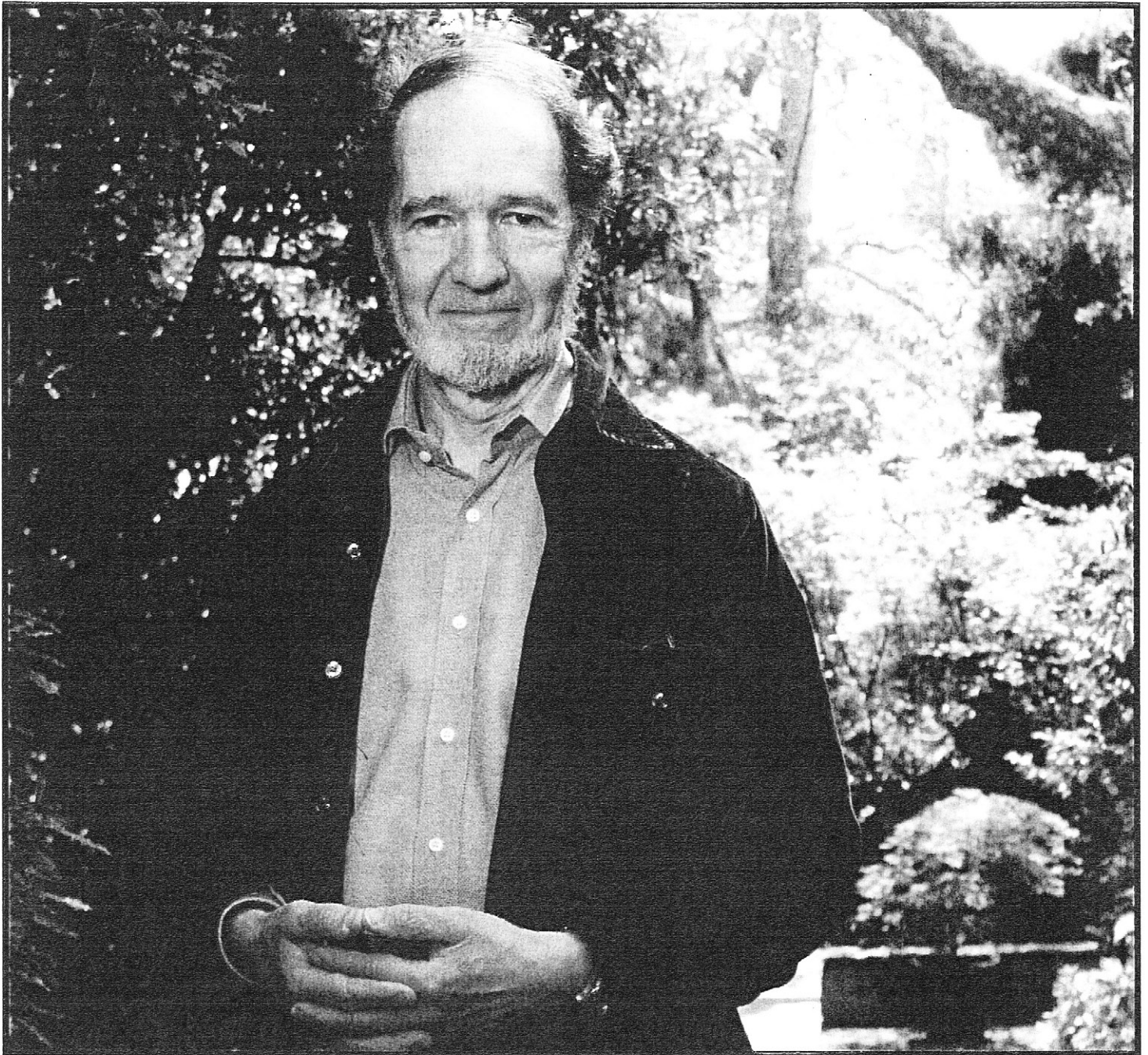
AT A CROSSROADS: A Montana diorama pinpoints land-use issues, weighing natural resources and luxury retreats.

ON Nov. 1, 2001, Jane Pisano made an auspicious phone call. It was her first day at the helm of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and she had a lot on her mind. There were funds to be raised, buildings to be renovated, a mission to be updated and public programs to be developed at the aging institution in Exposition Park. But nothing seemed quite as urgent as talking to Jared Diamond, a UCLA professor of geography with an unusually varied science portfolio and a batch of impressive credits, including a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, a National Medal of Science and a Pulitzer Prize for his 1997 book, "Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies."

"I had read 'Guns, Germs, and Steel' before I thought about

making a career change," said Pisano, who became president and director of the museum after 10 years at USC, initially as dean of the School of Public Administration and later as senior vice president for external relations. "It was just brilliant. Jared was smart enough to ask the most basic, first-order questions about why some people have lots of stuff and others don't. The answer could have been a textbook, but it wasn't. It was more like a novel that caused me to deeply understand how nature and culture had evolved and impacted societies. It was so powerful, I gave copies to everyone I care about and said, 'You have to read this book.'"

Pisano had not met Diamond, but she knew he had been a research associate at the museum since the late 1980s. That connection encouraged her to make a cold call, but she would have done it anyway.

ROBERT GAUTHIER *Los Angeles Times*

THE SOURCE: UCLA professor Jared Diamond's book *"Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed"* fueled the exhibit.

"I had to talk to him," she said. "I needed to tell him how fundamental and important the issues are that he was dealing with, and that this museum has the potential to deal with more effectively. Asking big questions is especially valuable when you are trying to feel your way into something that will be a new model of a natural history museum."

Diamond, who calls Pisano "this incredible, wonderful gift to the museum," took her call and agreed to meet with her. Their first, freewheeling conversation led to more focused discussions about the museum's direction. The impact of those talks will

probably emerge over time as plans for renovation and expansion are implemented. But one outcome will go on view today in an exhibition inspired by Diamond's latest book, *"Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed."*

Conceived as a multimedia journey through time and space and designed as a series of walk-through installations with video commentaries, the show explores links between societies and their environments. As implied by its interrogatory title — "Collapse?" — the exhibition asks why some civilizations decline while others thrive. It also draws parallels between the

past and the present, offering food for thought about the future.

Like "Guns, Germs, and Steel," Diamond's new book has an environmentally conscious, global reach. Paul R. Ehrlich, a professor of population studies at Stanford University, has described "Guns, Germs, and Steel" as "a brilliantly written, passionate, whirlwind tour through 13,000 years of history on all the continents — a short history of everything about everybody." Much the same can be said of "Collapse." But while "Guns" examines the buildup of societies, "Collapse" investigates their breakdown.

## MAKING IDEAS TANGIBLE

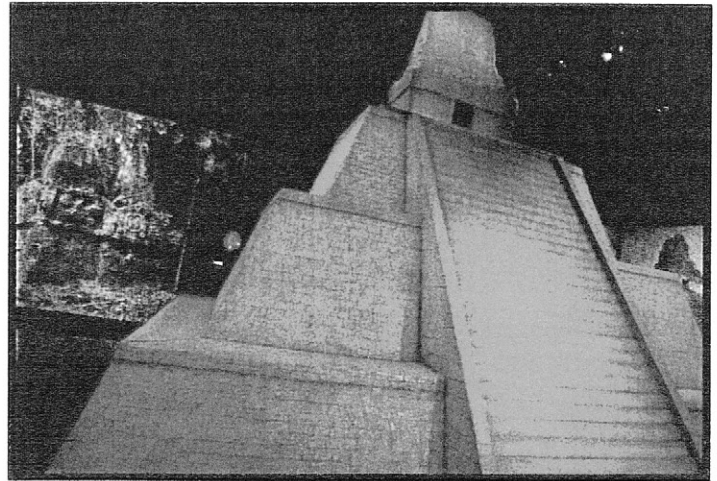
**T**HE subject matter of "Collapse" was an easy fit for the 92-year-old museum, which aspires to "inspire wonder, discovery and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds" with its collection of 33 million specimens and artifacts. But turning the 575-page book into an 8,000-square-foot exhibition with a \$1.6-million budget was a challenge. After funding was secured with a major gift from the Annenberg Foundation and additional help from the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, the problem was to create an exhibition about ideas, instead of the usual objects.

"It's a matter of translating," Diamond said. "A good analogy would be Prokofiev's ballet on 'Romeo and Juliet.' In the ballet there are no spoken words whatsoever and yet it has to re-create the action of the play. In the exhibition, there are words, but not many. But there's a great advantage: You lose the text, but you've got something visually appealing and a whole new experience. You've got something that sixth-grade children can come into, something that can appeal to 5-year-old children. It gets to a whole different audience."

Pleased with his recent collaboration with National Geographic on a video version of "Guns, Germs, and Steel," to be shown in July on "Nova," Diamond had no reservations about trying a different form of translation for "Collapse." But he had no intention of organizing the show. After a few brainstorming sessions, he left the project to Vanda Vitali, the museum's vice president of public programs, and her team of curatorial and technical specialists.

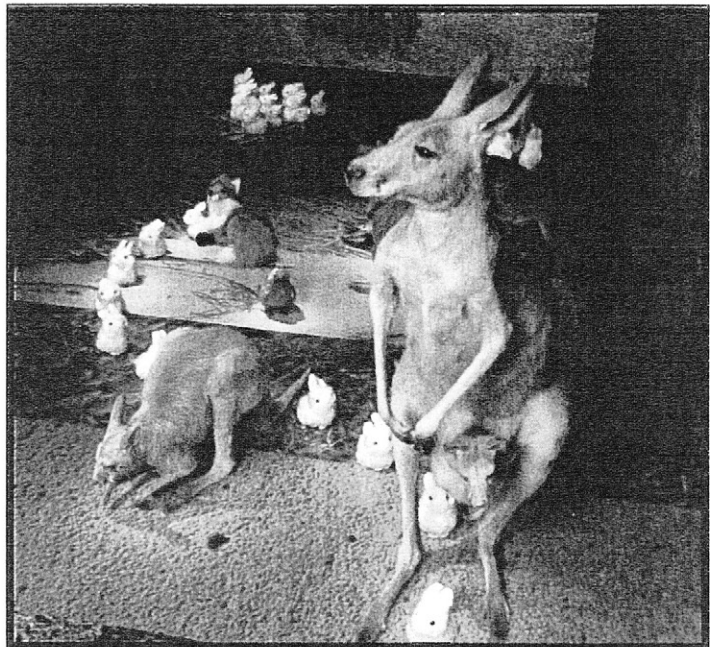
"I take my hat off to Jane for having the inspiration and the courage to try to do it," he said. "And I take my hat off to Vanda for figuring out how to do it. I wouldn't have the faintest idea."

"Collapse?" is the most difficult exhibition Vitali has organized



GLENN KOENIG *Los Angeles Times*

**FALLEN:** A re-creation of a Maya pyramid provokes questions about that culture's decline and the role of environmental challenges.



GLENN KOENIG *Los Angeles Times*

**THREATENED:** Taxidermic native Australian fauna are juxtaposed with toy models of interlopers.

because, she said, "it is so idea-rich. Exhibition development is an exercise in reductionism. And this subject is really an adult topic. How do you make it work for families, make it accessible and inspirational for further debate? It's a tall order."

The goal of educational exhibitions, she said, is "to grab you, inspire you, amuse you, so that you will think about the message."

To tell a story about human responsibility for the natural environment, the staff chose a few examples from the book and designed a setting intended to make visitors feel as if they are walking through a movie.



"Collapse?" focuses on two modern regions that face major environmental challenges, Montana and Australia, and two historical examples, a failure and a success. Diamond contends that the ancient Maya civilization declined partly because its leaders failed to deal with environmental problems, while Tokugawa shoguns in 17th century and 18th century Japan overcame a deforestation crisis that could have led to collapse.

The exhibition opens with a videotaped introduction by Diamond, in a gallery that emulates a Montana campground. Visitors walk through a bright-red motor home, with dirty dishes in the sink, onto a meadow of plastic grass surrounded by a photo mural of mountains. A picnic table in the center of the meadow is ringed by towering, paper-doll likenesses of eight Montanans with videotaped talking heads. Their recorded messages comment on environmental dilemmas in a state where wealthy newcomers buy large parcels of land for personal retreats and old-timers struggle to get by on declining resources.

The next room, geared to young children, uses cartoon characters to illustrate Diamond's five-point framework of factors that may contribute to collapse: environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, friendly trading partners and a society's response to its environmental problems. Upon leaving that space, visitors are asked to consider the present in light of the past. A gallery devoted to the Maya features a glowing red re-creation of the pyramid at Tikal, Guatemala, and examples of Maya artistry in jade, flint and clay. The following room, on Japan, offers a cycle of forestry and an elegant residential space with images and objects related to natural resources and Tokugawa rulers displayed in niches.

Visitors return to the present as they enter an arid Australian landscape. It's populated with taxidermic native animals and stuffed-toy versions of the rabbits and foxes introduced to the country with disastrous results. In the final room, a mirrored environment with projected images of traffic and other environmental problems poses questions about challenges facing Southern California.

It's all part of an effort to develop "a new language for natural history museums," Vitali said. "Natural history museums are in crisis throughout the world because other tools like films and documentaries cover the subject much better. In the past, natural history museums essentially exhibited oddities from nature, the biggest dinosaur, the longest shrimp and so on. They borrowed their language from art museums, in terms of masterpieces. And yet our task is not to deal with masterpieces. Our task is to deal with important social issues. I think this

exhibit is really true to our mission and true to what we set out to do: to open the debate on some of the central social issues that we face today here in California."

## FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

**F**OR Diamond, the exhibition represents a relatively new direction in his multifaceted career. A native of Boston who became an avid bird-watcher in his childhood, he has a wide-ranging intellect and has developed specialties in ornithology, physiology and ecology. Now known for expressing complex ideas about environmental issues in simple language, he entered that phase of his career relatively recently.

"My PhD thesis was on the gall bladder," he said. "My books are not on the gall bladder. They are on things I had to learn myself. I had to work to learn these things, to think about them, to get people to explain them to me. I then had to explain things to myself as clearly as possible. But then, once I had explained them to myself, I could explain them to other people."

As for what he has chosen to explain, Diamond said: "The birth of my sons 18 years ago radicalized me, made me gradually get away from gall bladder physiology to writing for the public on big issues — so as to shape the world of my sons, so that it's a world worth living in.

"There are millions of people in Los Angeles who will never read 'Collapse,' but the questions in it are important," he added. "I think the museum is the best shot we've got to engage them in these questions. I want people to take away two things. One, we have serious problems similar to problems that have ruined societies in the past. Two, we are able to solve those problems if we choose to do so. If we don't choose to do so, we are likely to be ruined by them. It's up to us."