

**Maya Wisdom and the Survival of Our Planet.** Lisa J. Lucero. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2025. xix and 239 pp., maps, photos, tables, illustrations, endnotes, further readings, index. \$24.95 paper (ISBN-13 978-0197765708), \$16.99 electronic (ISBN-13 978-0197765722)

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Climate change is one of the most pressing problems of our era. This global crisis presents an opportunity for archaeologists to apply our knowledge and skills, as social scientists who study long-term change and the relationship between humans and our environment. The political collapse of the Classic period (c. 300-900 CE) Maya kingdoms is often invoked as a case study. While environmental degradation, intense warfare, and political revolution have all been discussed as potential drivers of the collapse, many scholars now focus on a series of long droughts (climate change) as the principal contributing factor in the gradual abandonment of Maya city-states around 900 CE. The Maya people did not disappear but rather migrated and adopted less hierarchical and less-centralized political systems. (This made the Maya harder for the Spanish to conquer than the Aztec and Inca empires.) For the Maya, the world has ended and been recreated multiple times, and societal collapse might be seen as a point in an ongoing cycle, rather than an ending. While archaeologists once told the story of the Classic Maya collapse as a disaster or cautionary tale, it has become more common to present the collapse as a story of resilience. Today, we are more likely to question the naturalness of extreme inequality, embodied by Maya divine kings (see Graeber and Wengrow 2021). We are also more curious about and

respectful toward Indigenous ontologies and traditional ecological knowledge (see Kimmerer 2013). In this context, Lisa J. Lucero's recent book *Maya Wisdom and the Survival of Our Planet* makes bold claims about how people in the United States and other developed nations can use lessons from the ancient and modern Maya to confront today's climate crisis (Lucero 2025).

Lucero is an archaeologist who has worked for decades in Belize, focusing on kingship, water management, and ritual. Much of her recent academic and public-facing writing connects Maya cosmology to modern environmental problems and solutions (Lucero 2018, 2023, 2024; Lucero and Gonzalez Cruz 2020). While this is the main goal of *Maya Wisdom*, the book also serves as a detailed yet accessible introduction to the Maya lowlands, past and present. *Maya Wisdom* is in part a memoir of Lucero's career, and her personal stories from the field are engaging and informative. Lucero cares deeply about her Maya collaborators, as well as the plants, animals, and archaeological sites of the region, all of which she encourages us to see as relatives rather than natural and cultural resources. The book is well illustrated, through black and white photos, maps, and drawings. Geographers interested in life in the tropics should appreciate the holistic overview, including Lucero's comparisons to past kingdoms in Sri Lanka and Cambodia. This book would make an excellent gift or reading assignment for someone traveling to the Maya area, including a student attending an archaeological field school.

*Maya Wisdom* consists of ten short chapters. The first nine describe the contemporary and ancient Maya, their environment, their worldview, and their ways of life. The final chapter contains advice about implementing Maya-inspired sustainable practices in our own lives. A major theme throughout the book is that in the worldview of the Maya, humans are not centered and nature and culture are not separate. The Maya treat other members of the natural world as respected relatives, and they also animate, or ensoul, their built environment. Lucero argues that

the Maya lived sustainably and kept their world in balance for centuries, even in cities, citing an absence of species extinctions before the arrival of Europeans. One surprising passage in the fourth chapter, “The Maya Inclusive Worldview,” concerns witchcraft. Lucero describes how both the ancient and contemporary Maya have executed people accused of witchcraft as one means of keeping the world in balance. The persecution of marginalized community members through witchcraft accusations occurs around the world and throughout history, and it did not strike me as a clear example of the Maya inclusive worldview. Nevertheless, this passage may be useful in dispelling romantic notions of the Maya people as innocent, natural, or “noble savages.”

Lucero’s discussion of the Classic Maya political collapse deserves attention, since her book is framed as a response to climate change. Rather than focusing only on the severe droughts at the end of the Classic period, Lucero gives a more nuanced analysis. She points out that Maya kingship survived earlier droughts and suggests additional causes, such as population increase and deforestation. She puts some blame on the rulers, who chose to spend tribute and labor on elaborate ceremonies and construction projects, including monuments on which they recorded their own dynastic histories using a unique linear calendar (as opposed to cyclical solar and ritual calendars of Mesoamerica). Lucero mentions but downplays the increase in destructive warfare around the time of the collapse, as seen in the Petexbatún region of Guatemala, an area relatively unaffected by the droughts. The Classic Maya royal families were tightly interconnected, and the problems of one city-state must have created ripple effects throughout the whole system, resulting in a domino-like fall of the dynasties. For Lucero, this collapse was the beginning of a new, less hierarchical, and more resilient social and political system for the Maya people.

This viewpoint shapes the solutions that Lucero proposes in the last chapter, “The Survival of Our Planet.” Lucero takes for granted that our current way of life is headed for collapse, and that we should prepare to embrace a low-tech, more “traditional,” and less capitalistic system. Lucero’s suggestions are aimed at the household level, indicating a lack of faith in top-down national or international interventions. I was reminded of Lizzie Wade’s recent advice for thriving during the end-times in *Apocalypse*, also based on archaeological data (Wade 2025). Every generation might believe it is approaching the end of the world, but, on the other hand, every civilization will eventually collapse. As Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos compete to colonize Mars, as AI data centers spread across the earth’s surface, and as the United States abandons any attempt to curb global warming, I find Lucero’s and Wade’s perspectives more convincing than those of techno-optimists. On that note, what wisdom can we take from the Maya? Lucero proposes the following:

1. Diversify food systems and sources of green energy
2. Expand our notion of kinship to include non-humans, de-center humans, and embrace traditional Indigenous knowledge, while abandoning top-down control and the capitalist pursuit of profit
3. Integrate communities and promote solidarity through ritual
4. Reforest, increase biodiversity, and conserve existing species
5. Turn swimming pools into self-cleaning constructed wetlands and preserve natural wetlands
6. Make agriculture and landscaping more sustainable, grow useful plants around our homes, eat less meat, and stop breeding pets

7. Create green, bikeable cities focused on local connections between the urban and the rural and less reliant on a global market economy
8. Use traditional, non-electric technology and physical human labor, rather than inventing technologies that lead to new environmental and social problems
9. Reuse and repurpose architectural features and everyday objects, and end our reliance on plastic
10. Use human waste and dead bodies as fertilizer
11. Migrate as places become uninhabitable, and accept climate refugees

Lucero's insights and suggestions are laudable, and I agree that a global shift in mindset could come bottom-up from actions at the household level. However, will readers be eager to give up modern conveniences and embrace a Maya-inspired way of life? Part of me still wants to believe that top-down policy changes could save a version of our current society, and that I might continue typing on this laptop for a living rather than grinding my own corn. At the same time, it feels empowering to take steps toward a more sustainable and less anthropocentric lifestyle, including biking or walking to work, eating less meat, and using less plastic.

In summary, *Maya Wisdom* is a thought-provoking book for a wide audience, full of memorable stories from the world of the ancient and modern Maya. It remains to be seen how and when our society will collapse, but, as Lucero and the Maya point out, this planet will survive the end of our world, as it has before.

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