The tiny island-nation of Nauru (pronounced NAH-roo) in the western Pacific is the smallest and most remote republic in the world. It also is a case study in humanity’s ability to plunder its environment. Located on the equator some 500 km west of its nearest neighbor in the Marshall Islands, Nauru has been inhabited by Polynesian people for thousands of years. When first visited by European explorers in the eighteenth century, the island was a lush tropical paradise of swaying coconut palms and white coral beaches. Sailors called it Pleasant Island, but today the name is a bitter joke.

Compared to its former condition, Nauru is probably the most environmentally devastated nation on earth. So much land has been devoured by strip-mining that residents now face the prospect of having to abandon the whole island and move elsewhere. What the miners sought was guano, a thick phosphate-rich layer of bird droppings prized by industrialized countries as fertilizer. Billions of dollars worth of this treasure have been exported, first by colonial powers and then, since independence in 1968, by the Nauruans themselves.

After a century of mining, Nauru's 7500 residents are among the richest people in the world, but their environment has been almost totally wrecked. Eighty percent of the 21 sq km (8 sq mi) island has been stripped, leaving a bleak, barren moonscape of jagged coral pinnacles, some as tall as 25 meters. With all soil washed away, almost nothing lives in this wasteland. Traveling across it is impossible. To make things even worse, removing the vegetation has changed the climate. Heat waves rising from the sun-baked rock drive away rain clouds and the island now is plagued by constant drought.

Not only the island is ravaged. Nauruans may be among the world’s most affluent people, but they are also among the most unhealthy, plagued by cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity brought about by a lifestyle of idleness and imported junk food. Few islanders live past the age of 60. Since most mining is done by imported workers, Nauruans generally lack job skills to apply elsewhere. This case study is a sad example of how easy it is for modern technology and lack of foresight to degrade both a society and its environment.

The guano deposits are expected to last only a few more years. After that, residents will be left with only a thin sliver of habitable coastline. Some efforts have been made to import new soil and to restore vegetation to the desolate interior, but attempts have been unsuccessful. It may be too late to reverse the damage. The people may be able to use some of their accumulated trust fund to buy another island, but will they find one as comfortable and beautiful as what they once had? One village leader says wistfully, "I wish Nauru could be like it was before. I remember it was so beautiful and green everywhere. We could eat coconuts and breadfruit. It makes me cry when I see what has been done. I wish we'd never discovered the phosphate."

Could Nauru's example be a warning for all of us? Humans have a long history of depleting resources and then moving on. Could we find ourselves in a similar situation someday, having exhausted our natural resources but then having an uninhabitable world?

**Ethical Considerations**

If the Nauruans appeal for help in finding another place to live, would we be morally obligated to assist them? Do countries that bought fertilizer from Nauru bear a special responsibility for what has happened? If we see other examples of environmental destruction occurring elsewhere, would we be ethically justified to try to intervene and stop it?