

Book Review:  
*The Maya and Climate Change: Human-  
Environmental Relationships  
in the Classic Period Lowlands.*  
KENNETH E. SELIGSON. 2023. Oxford  
University Press. New York.  
284 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN:  
9780197652923.

by Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire  
Mount Royal University

Dr. Kenneth E. Seligson's new book, *The Maya and Climate Change: Human-Environmental Relationships in the Classic Period Lowlands*, is an encyclopedic treatise of ancient Maya environmental archaeology and paleoenvironmental science. The book comprises an easily digestible 203 pages of text subdivided into 8 clever chapters.

The overt objective of *The Maya and Climate Change* is to educate the public on ancient Maya ecology—an approach that partly relies on dispelling misconceptions about the civilization. And its two first chapters – 1. *Shifting the Focus* and 2. *From Camera Lucida to Lidar* – were clearly written with a broad public in mind. In these, Seligson expertly and clearly introduces Maya archaeology and key paleoenvironmental notions. Both chapters are comprehensive, well-illustrated, and include helpful cross-cultural analogies. The whole book also relies on endnotes citations, instead of in-text references, to facilitate the reading process for non-academics.

The book takes an academic turn in the next four chapters – aptly titled 3. *Forests*; 4. *Fields*; 5. *Water*; and 6. *Stone* – which are far more technical. These thoroughly distill a vast amount of literature on ancient Maya botanical, faunal, hydrological, and geological environments, and address

how Preclassic and Classic Maya people continuously adapted to their multifaceted landscapes. These four chapters rely on complex concepts and vocabulary which, even when defined, may be too technical for the average reader. The *Water* and *Stone* chapters are especially rich, deftly summarizing recent and fascinating sources that many Mayanists remain unfamiliar with. The 17 pages dedicated to lime production are perhaps the deepest dive in any topic, resulting in a productive discussion about this instrumental, yet seldom mentioned resource. I know I will regularly refer to these four chapters for future research and courses preparation. The almost 50-page-long bibliography is another excellent resource for researchers and students alike.

Chapter 7 – *Collapse and Resilience* – is less focused on the natural world, relying more heavily on landscape, social, and settlement archaeologies. The chapter is a welcome update on the constantly evolving questions of the Preclassic and Classic “collapses”. It provides a systemic and historically situated perspective on the entanglement of ancient Maya social institutions and environments. Seligson emphasizes that even though Classic Maya societies were incredibly resilient, the combined toll of millennia of sedentism and harsh climatic factors – especially droughts – eventually led Classic Maya regimes to erode. Notably, the chapter underscores that Maya Civilization – and its rich ecological heritage – is very much so alive today and never disappeared despite successive political implosions.

The final Chapter 8 is entitled *Looking Forward*. While its first eight pages simply summarize Chapters 3-7, the final four emphasize that if Maya Civilization thrived for so long, it was thanks to its responsible adaptations to a changing environment—especially its sustainable landscape management. Consequently, we must today learn from these millennial, Indigenous Maya environmental practices – several of which remain in use – to aim for a sustainable future.

The book may fall a little short of its public education objectives, but its tone is pedagogical and its structure intuitive. Its key points are repeated to ensure the reader remembers them. For example, the fact that “Classic communities learned from the various consequences of Preclassic human-environmental practices and developed new, diverse methods promoting long-term water conservation [and other ecological practices]” (p.112) is paraphrased in every chapter. And while the Highlands are seldom mentioned (which is logical, judging from the book’s title), the author adequately covers many Lowland regions while highlighting the great cultural diversity of the broader Maya world. A positive departure from the title is the productive integration of the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic periods. To be sure, Seligson incorporates plenty of Indigenous, ethnographic, and ethnohistorical literature to highlight continuities in Maya civilization.

I highly recommend *The Maya and Climate Change* to both scholars and students interested in environmental archaeology and the Maya. As a readable, affordable, short, and comprehensive monograph, this would be a great textbook for a Maya-focused, environmental archaeology course. This valuable contribution to the field will no doubt become a classic reference on ancient Maya ecology.