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Mid-Holocene vertebrate bone Concentration-Lagerstätte on oceanic island Mauritius provides a window into the ecosystem of the dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*)

Kenneth F. Rijsdijk a,b,c,*, Julian P. Hume d,e, Frans Bunnik c, F.B. Vincent Florens f, Claudia Baider g, Beth Shapiro h, Johannes van der Plicht i, Anwar Janoo j, Owen Griffiths k, Lars W. van den Hoek Ostende a, Holger Cremer l, Tamara Vernimmen l, Perry G.B. De Louw p, Assenjee Bholah m, Salem Saumtally m, Nicolas Porch n, James Haile o, Mike Buckley o, Matthew Collins o, Edmund Gittenberger a

a Geology Department, National Museum of Natural History ‘Naturalis’, P.O. Box 9517, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands
b Computational Geo-Ecology Group, Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Dynamics, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
c TNO, Princetonlaan 6, 3584 CR, Utrecht, The Netherlands
d Palaeobiology Research Group, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth PO1 3QL, UK
e Bird Group, Department of Zoology, Natural History Museum at Tring, Aken Street, Tring, Herts HP23 6AP, UK
f Department of Biosciences, University of Mauritius, RDuit, Mauritius
g Mauritius Herbarium, Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute, RDuit, Mauritius
h Department of Biology, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16801, USA
i Center for Isotope Research, University of Groningen, and Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, The Netherlands
j National Heritage Fund Mauritius, 12 Edith Cavell Street, Port Louis, Mauritius
k BioCulture (Mauritius) Ltd, Senneville, Rivière des Anguilles, Mauritius
l BotanicAll Archaeobotanical Research, Tuinstraat 27A, 1544 RS Zaandijk, The Netherlands
m Agronomy Department, Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute, RDuit, Mauritius
n Department of Archaeology and Natural History, RSPAS, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia
o BioArch, Biology and Archaeology, S Block, PO Box 373, York YO10 5YW, UK
p Subsurface and Groundwater systems Unit, Deltares, Princetonlaan 6, 3584 CR, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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A B S T R A C T

Although the recent history of human colonisation and impact on Mauritius is well documented, virtually no records of the pre-human native ecosystem exist, making it difficult to assess the magnitude of the changes brought about by human settlement. Here, we describe a 4000-year-old fossil bed at Mare aux Songes (MAS) in south-eastern Mauritius that contains both macrofossils (vertebrate fauna, gastropods, insects and flora) and microfossils (diatoms, pollen, spores and phytoliths). With >250 bone fragments/m² and comprising 50% of all known extinct and extant vertebrate species (*n* = 44) of Mauritius, MAS may constitute the first Holocene vertebrate bone Concentration-Lagerstätte identified on an oceanic volcanic island. Fossil remains are dominated by extinct giant tortoises (*Cylindraspis* spp. (63%), passerines (w10%), small bats (7.8%) and dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) (7.1%). Twelve radiocarbon ages [four of them duplicates] from bones and other material suggest that accumulation of fossils took place within several centuries. An exceptional combination of abiotic conditions led to preservation of bones, bone collagen, plant tissue and microfossils. Although bone collagen is well preserved, DNA from dodo and other Mauritian vertebrates has proved difficult. Our analysis suggests that from ca 4000 years ago (4 ka), rising sea levels created a freshwater lake at MAS, generating an oasis in an otherwise dry environment which attracted a diverse vertebrate fauna. Subsequent aridification in the south-west Indian Ocean region may have increased carcass accumulation during droughts, contributing to the exceptionally high fossil concentration. The abundance of floral and faunal remains in this Lagerstätte offers a unique opportunity to reconstruct a pre-human ecosystem on an oceanic island, providing a key foundation for assessing the vulnerability of island ecosystems to human impact.

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1. Introduction

Oceanic volcanic island ecosystems are generally considered ideal natural laboratories to study evolution, ecosystem functioning...
and human induced extinctions of native island species (McArthur and Wilson, 1967; Burney, 1997; Biber, 2002). Compared to continental settings, islands contain ecosystems of lower trophic complexity, often lack mammal predators and are geographically isolated (Steadman, 2006). Unfortunately, almost all have been disturbed or destroyed by anthropogenic activity (Burney et al., 2001; Biber, 2002; Blackburn et al., 2004), making an assessment of human modification difficult (Steadman and Martin, 2003; Steadman, 2006). The presence of a pre-human fossil record containing both macro- and micro-organisms is, therefore, essential when examining pristine island ecosystems (e.g. Burney et al., 2001, 2003; Hearty et al., 2005). However, such sites are extremely rare, primarily due to taphonomic bias on volcanic islands and intense human land modification (Hume, 2005; Steadman, 2006).

In October 2005, a 4-kyr-old fossil depository was re-discovered at Mare aux Songes (MAS; 20°26′51″S; 57°41′23.5″E), with both macro- (including vertebrate and invertebrate fauna and flora) and microfossils. With more than 250 bone fragments/m², the deposit is exceptionally rich in fossil material. We report the findings of two multidisciplinary research campaigns at MAS held in 2006 and 2007, and assess the paleoecological significance of the fossil layer. We provide detailed results of the taxonomic analysis of both vertebrates and gastropods, along with initial results for insects and fossil flora. Based on palaeontological and stratigraphical evidence, depositional processes are reconstructed, and the origin and conditions of preservation of the natural fossil accumulation are discussed.

2. Regional and historic context

Mauritius along with Réunion and Rodrigues Islands comprise the Mascarene Islands, which are situated in the south-west Indian Ocean (Fig. 1A) some 830 km east of Madagascar. Isotopic dating suggests that Mauritius emerged 8 Ma ago (McDougall and Chamalaun, 1969), from a hotspot that is presently situated off the SE coast of Réunion. The geomorphology of Mauritius is dominated by two stages of large-scale caldera formation at 6 Ma (Saddul, 2002), followed by small scale volcanism across the island; the last phase of volcanic eruptions occurred as recently as 20 ka. Since then the island has remained seismically inert (Camoin et al., 1997, 2004). Westward trade winds and ocean surface currents, generated by mid-oceanic high-pressure belts and the mid-Indian Ocean Gyre, add to the ecological isolation of the island (Padya, 1987).

The recent discovery of Mauritius during the 16th century resulted in an unparalleled documented account of human impact on a pristine island ecosystem (Cheke, 1987; Moree, 1998; Hume et al., 2004; Cheke and Hume, 2008). Although generally crude, these documents have proved invaluable in ascertaining the original macro biodiversity. It was interest in the dodo (Raphus cucullatus) that initiated a large-scale search for fossil remains (Hume, 2005), leading Harry Higginson, a railway engineer, and George Clark, a local school teacher, to discover the first sub-fossil (not lithified) dodo bones at a marsh called the Mare aux Songes (MAS), SE Mauritius, during excavation of a railway embankment in 1865 (Clark, 1866; Hume and Prys-Jones, 2005). Further excavations in 1889 and the early 20th century recovered more fossil material, including hundreds of dodo bones and elements of other endemic vertebrates (Hume and Prys-Jones, 2005; Cheke and Hume, 2008). In 1943 the marsh was filled with dolerite blocks and gravels to combat malaria, after which the site became neglected and largely forgotten. All previous excavations were conducted without obtaining geological and paleoecological contextual data (Cheke, 1987; Livezey, 1993; Staub, 1996; Hume, 2005). In October 2005 a team of Mauritian and Dutch scientists discovered at MAS a fossil layer beneath the material discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries, allowing the fossil assemblage to be studied for the first time in a geological and paleoecological context.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Geology and paleontology

In 2005, a geomorphological survey was carried out, followed by a geophysical georadar and borehole survey (12 motorised rotary diamond drill cores with cross-sectional diameter of 100 mm). As a result of these surveys, three pits (14 m²) were excavated in sub-basin I and III (Fig. 1B) in 2006 using a shovel scoop of 0.64 m³ (1 m × 0.8 m × 0.8 m) to penetrate gravel and boulders from layer D and expose the fossil layer (Figs. 1B and 2A). In 2007, excavations concentrated on pit MAS 2006-TR1A, where more fossils were collected (Fig. 1B: TR1). Due to the rapid inflilling of groundwater, it was not possible to excavate under dry conditions. Sedimentary structures within the centre of the scoop sample were relatively undisturbed and were used for sedimentological, stratigraphic analysis and sampling in a stratigraphical context. However, the in situ vertebrate material was disturbed during removal. Therefore, articulation (individual skeleton completeness) and way-up criteria could not be assessed. Bulk sediment samples > 100 kg were sieved with 150 mm, 10 mm and 4 mm meshes to remove fossil material. Sub-samples (~2 kg) were sieved using 1 mm meshes, from which fossils were hand-picked using microscopy (~40). Insect and other arthropod remains were obtained from three peat samples (total ~1.85 kg) after washing through nested 4 mm, 2 mm, 1 mm, 500 μm, and 250 μm sieves, and the coarse fractions (>500 μm) hand-picked in water under a binocular microscope.

3.2. Hydrology

At six locations at MAS, four in sub-basin I, one in sub-basin II and one in sub-basin III, piezometers were installed in order to measure the hydraulic head and to take groundwater samples. Piezometers were installed at 1 and 3 m below surface level, where water level loggers registered the hydraulic head every 15 min. Measurements of the electrical conductivity and pH of the groundwater in the piezometers, and of the surface water, were carried out in the three sub-basins.

3.3. Collagen and aDNA

Radiocarbon ages using eight faunal and floral specimens were radiocarbon-dated. The samples were pre-treated, and datable fraction isolated using standard protocols (Mook and Streurman, 1983). The 14C dates are reported in BP by convention. They are calibrated into calendar ages using the Radiocarbon Calibration curve for the southern hemisphere (McCormac et al., 2004). Control measurement on a modern gastropod demonstrated that reservoir effects are absent. Stable isotope ratios δ13C and δ15N were measured by Stable Isotope Mass Spectrometry and are reported in per mil deviation from the international standard (VPDB resp. air). Amino acid analysis was conducted on total bone according to Parfitt et al. (2005). Protein mass-spectrometry was applied on gelatinized acid insoluble “collagen”, digested with trypsin and fractionated on a monolithic column (Liquid Chromatography Packings) using 0.1% trifluoroacetic in acetonitrile/H2O. Following separation, peptides were analysed on an Applied Biosystems 4700 Proteomics Analyzer. The tandem mass spectrometry spectra were searched against the UniProt protein databases. Protocols to extract DNA from recovered bone fragments follow Shapiro et al. (2004). Polymerase Chain Reaction amplifications were performed on bone using generic primers for birds and mammals, as well as
dodo-specific (Shapiro et al., 2002) and tortoise-specific primers (Austin and Arnold, 2002).

4. Results

4.1. Geomorphology

Mare aux Songes (20°26′51.2″ S; 57°41′23.5″ E) is a 10 m deep elongated basalt rock-bounded basin dated between 0.1 and 0.02 Ma (McDougall and Chamalaun, 1969). The depression is located near the coast less than 1 km from Blue Bay, and consists of three isolated sub-basins (I, II and III) that are separated by rock thresholds (Fig. 1B). The base of these sub-basins is situated <1.5 m above mean sea level (+MSL). The N and S sides of the sub-basins are surrounded by 10-m high steep bedrock and talus slopes (>60°) with gentle slopes on the E and W sides. Within the sub-basins, groundwater level is just below the present surface and is alkaline, with a pH ranging from 7.1 to 7.8 (Fig. 1C). Tidal groundwater within the three basins fluctuates between 100 and 250 mm, indicating that the sub-basins are connected with each other and with the ocean (Fig. 1D). Evidence for connectivity between the sub-basins is also supported by the increasing salinity of the groundwater towards the sea (Fig. 1C). The connection is probably achieved through fractured basalts, which are frequently exposed in cliff sections surrounding the rock basin. Freshwater springs, which are now obscured, were situated at the western margin of MAS according to Clark (1866).

4.2. Lithology and sedimentology

Sub-basin I contains five sedimentary units (A, B, C, D and E) recognised within the MAS rock basin (Fig. 2). All stratigraphic
units besides the basal bedrock are unconsolidated alkaline sediments with pH > 7 (Fig. 2). The base of sub-basin I lies at max. 8.10 m below present sea level and is overlain by ~8 m thick sedimentary succession. The base of the succession is a grey basaltic bedrock, which is locally brittle and contains yellow and/or yellow-brown staining below the base of the overlying sedimentary succession.

4.2.1. Unit A

The bedrock is overlain by ~1–m thick grey firm clay layer (layer A). Yellow-brown iron oxide mottles are common and the clay is locally brown to black towards the top. Carbon isotope analyses indicate a very low concentration of organic matter within the clay, and an age ranging between 8 and 10 ka.

4.2.2. Unit B

A). Yellow-brown iron oxide mottles are common and the clay is overlying sedimentary succession. Towards the top, the gyttja is brown and mixed with organic debris. The larger vertebrate fossil elements include bone fragments, e.g. skulls, avian beaks, ribs, vertebrae and pedal phalanges (86% of endemic reptiles and 80% (n = 5) of native mammals. Using minimum number criteria (n), vertebrate species are dominated by the extinct giant tortoises Cylindraspis triserrata and Cylindraspis inepta (63% n1 = 294), passerines (~10% n1 = 49), small bats (7.8% n1 = 36) and dodo (7.1% n1 = 33) (Table 2).

4.2.3. Unit C

Layer D is comprised entirely of fossil material, with elements dominated by wooden plant remains and vertebrate bones set in a matrix of twigs, seed, nuts and pits. (Fig. 2B). The larger vertebrate fossil elements include bone fragments >400 mm diameter (tortoise carapace) and tree stems up to >500 mm, while the smallest elements, e.g. small seeds, bats and passerine material, average ~20 mm. The matrix consists entirely of seed, nuts, wood fragments and peat (Fig. 2C). Amorphous peat is dispersed between the matrix grains, while isolated fine carbonate sand grains and discontinuous 10–200 mm thick sand lenses are dispersed within layer D. Eight different fossil elements from layer D were dated between 4 and 3.7 ka (Table 1). The top of layer D contains basaltic (dolerite) gravels. Towards the top of layer D, both the concentration of these dolerite gravels increases as well as its grain size from >5 mm to >50 mm.

4.2.5. Unit E

Layer D is capped by ~4 m thick dolerite gravels and blocks between 50 and 250 mm in diameter (Layer E). The MAS succession has been sealed under layer E since the 1940s, and can now only be penetrated with mechanical digging machinery.

4.3. Paleontology and taphonomy

The basal clays in layer A contain no macroscopic or microscopic fossils, while the carbonate sand layer B contains scarce macroscopic faunal fossils >2 mm. These include rare shell or coral fragments >2 mm, and occasionally isolated palm tree stems >150 mm and in situ plant (fern/palm) roots >100 mm diameter. Both gyttja layer C and fossil layer D contain microfossils comprising diatoms, pollen and non-pollen palynomorphs and are notably rich in palm phytoliths. The diatom assemblages of layers D and C consist mainly of brackish water and brackish-freshwater species (Achnanthes cf. submarina, Anomoeoneis sphaerophora, Craticula halophila and small fragilarioid taxa) and lack planktonic species. Layer D contains both vertebrates and invertebrates (molluscs and insects) (Fig. 3). The wet bulk weight ratio of vertebrate fauna to flora ranges between 1 and 2 (measured) to ca 1–4 (eye ball). Based on the number of bone fragments found within 14 m², the density of vertebrate bone fragments of >4 mm amount to more than 250 bone fragments/m². Cores, excavations and test pits indicate that within basins I and II, layer D extends over 3.7 ha.
4.3.3. Plants

Botanical material comprised pollen, seeds, leaves, branches, tree stems, roots, and bracket fungi. The woody material includes stems 100–400 mm in diameter (see Fig. 3F), branches (5–50 mm) and roots (50–200 mm). Black sub-rounded coalified wood fragments (10–30 mm) are mixed with mechanically damaged but intact branches, roots and stems, some of which still contain dermal tissue and retain the original red/brown colours. The presence of macroscopically clearly defined concentric rings on tree stumps occurs frequently (Fig. 3F), while some wood fragments show insect damage. Seeds, nuts, piths and wood of at least 60 plant taxa are distinguished (Van Geel, personal communication), with 14 identified to specific species level (Table 2). These species originate from three broad community types: marsh, wet forest and dry forest (Table 2). The species of the wet forest species include canopy trees such as *Sideroxylon grandiflorum* (Sapotaceae) and *Canarium paniculatum* (Burseraceae). Randomly selected seeds of the *Sideroxylon* \( n = 117 \) are all mature, >34 mm in diameter.
Anatomical wood analyses confirm the presence of different genera, with at least one genus *Diospyros* (Ebenaceae) positively identified. There are 12 known endemic species of *Diospyros* in Mauritius growing in different habitats, including dry and wet, coastal and upland forests (Richardson, 1981; Atkinson and Sevathan, 2005). Further species identification awaits the completion of a Mauritian wood anatomical database.

### 4.4. Preservation conditions

The preservation of vertebrate fossils at MAS can be explained by the presence of anaerobic, alkaline and slightly saline conditions of sediments and groundwater. An important factor in bone preservation is the alkaline condition of the fossil-hosting sediments (layers B, C and D) and groundwater (pH values > 7), both conducive to bone preservation (Retallack, 1984; Nielsen-Marsh et al., 2007). In acidic volcanic settings as on Mauritius, alkaline conditions are rare and occur exclusively in the coastal belt (William, 1984). In the coastal zone, the alkalinity is derived from dissolved CaCO₃ percolating through the carbonate coral sands B, thereby increasing the pH of the groundwater. Anaerobic conditions prevent further oxidation and interfere with microbiological degradation (Jans et al., 2004).

Analysis of collagen-like amino acid profiles demonstrates that macromolecular proteins (polypeptides) are well preserved, providing a sound phylogenetic grouping of the dodo polypeptide sequence within the Aves class. The absence of aDNA within the dodo and giant tortoise collagen, however, indicates that degradation occurred at a biomolecular level. This is almost certainly due to their thermal age (the product of fossil age and its storage temperature: Smith et al., 2003) of ca 49 ky at 10 °C and D/L Asx ratios of 0.17 and 0.15, respectively, all just below the boundary of DNA survival (Buckley et al., 2008). These data confirm, however, that younger bones from MAS should contain amplifiable DNA (Austin and Arnold, 2002). The precise conditions that are conducive to bone, collagen and aDNA preservation are complex, however, and require further analysis.

### 5. Interpretation

The rock valley of MAS is situated within a lava flow dated to younger than 200 ka (McDougall and Chamalaun, 1969). Fossil corals (>1 m) present on the valley floor at the western margin of the valley are assigned to interglacial MIS 5e age, suggesting that the valley predates 120 ka. The geomorphology of the rock valley, in particular being bounded by steep cliffs, suggests collapse of a pre-existing cavity in the subsurface. In volcanic settings rock valleys generally evolve from the collapse of lava tunnels (e.g. Peterson et al., 1994), and these systems are common in (SW) Mauritius (Middleton, 1995; Saddul, 2002; Janoo, 2005), suggesting that the MAS rock valley was created in a similar way. Therefore at some point after 120 ka, large-scale roof collapse led to the formation of a dry valley at MAS (Fig. 4A), while pedological processes resulted in iron oxidation motting on the top of basaltic bedrock, and tropical weathering of basalt led to the formation of a kaolinitic clay in layer A (Fig. 4B). Radiocarbon dating of organic matter in the top of the clay suggests soil formation pre-dates the early Holocene (MIS 1).

Holocene sea level rise in the Mascarenes followed the global eustatic rise and rose from 7.5 ka with a constant rate of 1.1–1.2 mm yr⁻¹, until 2 or 3 ka when it reached its present position (Camoin et al., 2004). Neither seismic activity nor far-field equatorial ocean-syphoning induced sea level rises during the late Holocene (cf. Mitrovica and Peltier, 1991; Peltier, 1991; Mitrovica and Milne, 2002) occurred in this part of the Indian Ocean (Camoin et al., 1997, 2004; Zinke et al., 2003). Sea level rise since the Last
Glacial Maximum (LGM) led to landward shifting of marine bioclastic carbonate sand beaches and dune belts during the Holocene, after which the coastal dune belt progressed landward. Due to the action of easterly trade winds, the MAS depression was filled with aeolian carbonate beach sands B (Fig. 4C). In response to sea level rise, groundwater levels within the MAS sub-basins were directed upwards. At ca 4 ka, sea levels reached –1.5 m MSL (Camoin et al., 2004), leading to the formation of shallow brackish-freshwater lake in the deepest parts of MAS (Fig. 4D). During this period, gyttja layer C accumulated under low energy conditions. The diatom assemblages mainly brackish water and brackish-freshwater of layers C and D indicate that MAS was a freshwater lake with an increased salt percentage, while the scarcity of planktonic diatoms suggest that the lake was shallow (<2 m). After gyttja formation, the lake was filled with amorphous peat, plant macrofossils and carcases, forming the peaty fossil layer D (Fig. 4E). The anomalous high concentration plant and vertebrate fossil and small time window indicate that fossil deposition in the shallow lake occurred rapidly.

The isolated setting of the enclosed rock basin at MAS suggests that the fossil elements within layer D are (par-) autochthonous and excludes transportation of fossil material to the basin. Analysis of the floral remains and the presence of peat deposits indicate that the lake subsequently transformed into a marsh, and the matrix of fossil layer D, which contains fine seeds (<4 mm) and lacks coarse marine clastics (>4 mm) (Fig. 2B), suggests that accumulation occurred under low energy conditions. This is also confirmed by the absence of traces of high-energy fluvial erosion on vertebrate bones (Hume, 2005), the presence of fine bones (<4 mm) and associated bone-matrenes (e.g. tortoise skull with jaw bones). Disarticulation within the deposit may have been a result of bioturbation by giant tortoises, carcass scavenging and differential pneumatic behaviour of elements (e.g. crania with large air spaces) (Hume, 2005).

The presence of dispersed sand grains and fine sand layers with lake marl D and fossil layer E (Fig. 2A) suggests low energy climatic conditions alternated with periods of high wind activity that led to periodically increased aeolian input within the lake and marsh. The anthropogenic infilling of the marsh with bedrock boulders and gravels formed the dolerite blocky gravel layer E and the mixing of gravel with layer D. The dumping of gravels may have led to compaction of the fossils in the gyttja and peat layer. However, bones forced into the soft peat matrix remained undamaged. Dumping led also to substantial mechanical fracturing of fossils, notably tortoise carapace and larger (>20 mm) bones (Fig. 3A), yet fragile and smaller elements probably remained intact due to their being embedded in a soft peaty woody matrix in layer D. Considering the prevailing alkalic conditions at MAS, it is unlikely that the abundance of small bone diaphyses is due to sediment acidity. Rather it may be a characteristic of predation and pellet regurgitation by the Mauritian raptors, Falco punctatus, Circus maillardi and Mascarenotus sauzieri (Dodson and Wexlar, 1979; Hume, 2005).

6. Discussion

6.1. Oasis at MAS

The majority of hydrological drainage on volcanic islands occurs in the subsurface via lava tunnels, or the interface of impermeable and permeable basalts (Proag, 1995; Saddul, 2002). Stagnant freshwater is rare, especially in the coastal lowlands, due to rocky basaltic soils with poor water retention capabilities and local high evaporation rates. In the coastal lowlands of SE Mauritius, evaporation rates of 2000 mm yr$^{-1}$ exceed the annual rainfall of 1200–1500 mm yr$^{-1}$ (Padya, 1987). In a pristine state, therefore, the lowlands of the SE were probably dominated by a dry forest community, which was completely deforested after the 19th century (Vaughan and Wiehe, 1937).

A rare combination of abiotic conditions at MAS led to the formation of stagnant freshwater conditions. The subsequent formation of a shallow lake in this dry lowland setting may have resembled an oasis, thus attracting a diverse faunal and floral
### Table 2

Species identified from fossil layer D at MAS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vertebrates (extinct)</th>
<th>Minimum number of individuals collected in 2005/6/7 of 8681 total bone fragments.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Popular name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Element type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cylindraspis trierriata/neptia (Testudinidae)</td>
<td>Giant tortoise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cylindraspis trierriata/neptia (Testudinidae)</td>
<td>Giant tortoise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phelsuma cf guimbeau (Geckoidea)</td>
<td>Day gecko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leiolepis mauritian (Scincidae)</td>
<td>Giant skink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leiolepis telfairi (Scincidae)</td>
<td>Telfair’s skink</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phoenicopterus ruber (Phoenicopteridae)</td>
<td>Greater flamingo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphanopteryx bonasia (Rallidae)</td>
<td>Red rail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circus maillardi (Accipitrina)</td>
<td>Mauritius harrier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falcia newtoni (Rallidae)</td>
<td>Mascarene coot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raphus cucullatus ( Columbidae)</td>
<td>Dodo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoanias moyeri (Columbidae)</td>
<td>Pink pigeon</td>
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<td>Lophoistocaps mauritianus (Pittacidae)</td>
<td>Broad-billed parrot</td>
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<td>Lophoistocapsus bensoni (Pittacidae)</td>
<td>Grey parrot</td>
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<td>Maccarenois sauzieri (Strigidae)</td>
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<td>Coreus sumptus (Campephagidae)</td>
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<td>Hypsipetes olivaceus (Pycnonotinae)</td>
<td>Olive bulb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foudia rubra (Ploceidae)</td>
<td>Mauritius fody</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zosterops sp. (Zosteropidae)</td>
<td>Mascarene White eye</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pteropus niger (Megachiroptera)</td>
<td>Greater fruit bat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pteropus subinger (Megachirotecta)</td>
<td>Lesser fruit bat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Todalia acutelobulatus (Microchirotecta)</td>
<td>Mascarene freetailed bat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taphozous mauritianus (Microchirotecta)</td>
<td>Grey tomb bat</td>
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**Invertebrates**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Common name</th>
<th>Habitat</th>
<th>Status (IUCN threat category)</th>
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<td>Cyclopis conoida</td>
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<td>Mauritane endemic (vulnerable)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Land</td>
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<td>Omphalotropis variopeta</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Mauritane endemic (least concern)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pacystyla bicolor</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Mauritane endemic (vulnerable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanides tuberculata</td>
<td>Fresh and brackish water</td>
<td>Native (least concern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nerita gigante</td>
<td>Fresh and brackish water</td>
<td>Native (least concern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulinus cernicus</td>
<td>Freshwater</td>
<td>Mauritane native (least concern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gryaulus mauritianus</td>
<td>Freshwater</td>
<td>Mauritane endemic (least concern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physa acuta</td>
<td>Freshwater</td>
<td>Introducde from North America (not applicable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subalma octa</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Introducde from Tropical America (not applicable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allopeas sp</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Introducde from Tropical Africa (not applicable)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Flora**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common name</th>
<th>Habitat</th>
<th>Status (IUCN threat category) (estimated population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foetida mauritian (Lecithidae)</td>
<td>Bois Pandem</td>
<td>Extant (vulnerable) (20000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latania loddigesi (Arecaeae)</td>
<td>Blue Latan</td>
<td>Extant (endangered) (10000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latania cf lontanoides? (Arecaeae)</td>
<td>Dry forest</td>
<td>Extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandanus windermeehsii (Pandaneae)</td>
<td>Vacoas</td>
<td>Extant (vulnerable) (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sideroxylon boutonianum (Sapotaceae)</td>
<td>Bois de Fer</td>
<td>Extant (critically endangered) (250)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sideroxylon oppositifolia (Sapindaceae)</td>
<td>Bois de Fer</td>
<td>Extant (vulnerable) (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminalia benzone (Combretaceae)</td>
<td>Bois Benjou</td>
<td>Extant (vulnerable) (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassine orientalis (Celastraceae)</td>
<td>Bois d'Oliv</td>
<td>Extant (least concern) (100000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dicorysperma album (Arecaeae)</td>
<td>Cylindraspis (Arecaeae)</td>
<td>Extant (least concern) (14 in wild, 1000s cultivated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyathere sp (Cyathaceae)</td>
<td>Fandia</td>
<td>Extant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canarium paniculatum (Burseraceae)</td>
<td>Bois Colophane</td>
<td>Extant (endangered) (2000)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Elaeocarpus integrifolius (Elaeocarpaceae)</td>
<td>Bois Clou</td>
<td>Extant (critically endangered) (200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugenia elliotica (Myrtaceae)</td>
<td>Dry forest</td>
<td>Extant (endangered) (200)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pandanus icymi (Pandaneae)</td>
<td>Vacoas</td>
<td>Extant (critically endangered) (150)</td>
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<td>Pandanus cf macrostigma (Pandaneae)</td>
<td>Vacoas</td>
<td>Extant (critically endangered) (3)</td>
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<td>Sideroxylon grandiflorum (Sapotaceae)</td>
<td>Tamlabalacoe</td>
<td>Extant (endangered) (1000)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antirhea borbonica (Rubiaceae)</td>
<td>Bois Louiseau</td>
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<td>Pandanus cf barkly (Pandaneae)</td>
<td>Vacoas</td>
<td>Extant (endangered) (200)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indetermined (Cyperaceae)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diospyros sp (Ebenaceae)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vertebrates’ minimum number of individuals; estimates based on single bone elements that characterise single individuals.

a Extinct species.
b Minimum number of individuals collected in previous excavations.

coupled with permanent standing water in an otherwise seasonally dry area, may explain the abundance of fossil remains at MAS. Furthermore, this environment would have been conducive to maintaining a large population of dodo and giant tortoise, for which stable isotope ratios $\delta^{13}C$ and $\delta^{15}N$ (Table 1) presented here suggest a predominantly herbivorous diet (cf. Kohn, 1999) based on C3 plants, in agreement with previous suggestions (Hachisuka, 1953; Owen, 1866; Livezey, 1993).
Fig. 4. Panels showing stages of depositional processes at Mare aux Songes. Sea level rise curve is based upon Camoin et al. (2004). (A) More than 10 kyr ago, with sea levels 20 m lower than present, a dry forest occurred at MAS. (B) Around 10 kyr ago, collapse of the lava tunnel formed a dry valley and soil formation occurred. (C) 8 kyr ago, sea level rise forced coastal dunes shifting inland and the basin became infilled with aeolian bioclastic carbonate sand. (D) 4 kyr ago, sea level rise to 2 m below present, led to perching upwards of the groundwater level and subsequent lake formation. After 4 kyr ago the shallow lake rapidly filled with carcasses and plant remains. (E) Up to the present. Carcasses in this period accumulated above the mean groundwater level and are therefore not preserved.
6.2. Catastrophic extinction or gradual accumulation?

Duplicate radiocarbon analysis of five different elements (nine independent $^{14}$C measurements, including two dodo metatarsi) yields a weighted averaged $^{14}$C age of 3870 ± 20 BP. This corresponds to the calibrated intervals (1σ) 2285–2270 and 2255–2205 cal BC (Table 1). Although these suggest a catastrophic event at that time, the other older dated elements from fossil layer D (Table 1: GrA–31369, GrN–30069, GrN–30070) indicate that the assemblage represents a wider time window of several centuries. In addition, MAS museum specimens of *Cylindraspis* sp. collected in the mid-1800s yielded significantly younger radiocarbon ages, between ca 1490 and 1580 BP (Burleigh and Arnold, 1986). Although the exact provenance of the museum specimens is unknown, the younger ages suggest fossil layer D is diachronous. A wider time window is also supported by paleontological evidence, as bones exhibiting variable bioerosion, rootlet marks and bone tannin stains suggest differential temporal weathering conditions (Hume, 2005). The botanical remains also negate a single catastrophic event: *S. grandis* and *sensu* Burney, 1999*a* are excluded. The seed-dominated matrix of layer D, lack of inorganic clasts > 2 mm, and the presence of delicate bones (< 1 mm thick) and insect remains, indicate that low energy hydrodynamic conditions prevailed (cf. lacustrine). Laminae of aeolian redistributed bioclastic carbonate sand and dispersed sand grains within layers C and D suggest that tranquil conditions were interspersed with strong winds (storm) events, which led to the accumulation of fine aeolian sands. The lack of coarse (> 2 mm) marine clastic material within layers C and D demonstrates, however, that high-energy events, such as tsunamis, can be excluded. The geomorphological setting and centuries time span of deposition infer that the 4 ka old fossil bed represents a time-averaged assemblage formed by centuries of continuous plant and carcass attrition (cf. Kidwell and Bosence, 1991). More datings of bones are, however, required to assess the time window of carcass accumulation and to permanently exclude a short-term catastrophic mass mortality for the fauna.

Although the assemblage represents a natural death accumulation, extreme climatic stress imposed by regional acidification 4 ka ago (Gasse, 2000; Marchant and Hooghiemstra, 2004) may have induced peaks in death rates over two centuries, leading to high fossil concentration. The windward coastal position of MAS, which is currently characterized by the highest Mauritian evaporation rate in excess of 2200 mm yr$^{-1}$ (Padya, 1987), would make this coastal region particularly sensitive to droughts during southern hemisphere winter dry seasons. However, the exact criteria that led to concentration of fossil material at MAS remain to be explored.

6.3. Lagerstätte

Fossil depositories that contain both rich and diverse macro- and microfossils (so called integrated sites sensu Burney, 1999) are rare on volcanic islands (e.g. Steadman, 2006). These sites are considered “Rosetta stones” for obtaining understanding of pre-human ecosystem dynamics, and to assess the effect of human impact on native ecosystems (e.g. Burney et al., 2001; Hearty et al., 2005). The diversity of animal and plant fossils, reflecting a significant proportion of the pre-human ecosystem, and their concentration in a single fossil horizon prospected over more than 3.7 ha, indicates that this deposit warrants status as a Concentration-Lagerstätte. It exhibits extraordinary fossil richness and paleoecological completeness (e.g. Seilacher et al., 1985; Seldén and Nudds, 2004). With a bone concentration > 250 fragments/m² and fossils with an age less than 4 kyrs, the MAS fossil locality belongs to one of the richest and youngest pre-human oceanic island vertebrate bone Concentration-Lagerstätten known.

The unique qualitative and quantitative properties of the specimen material provide data for morphological analyses, for reconstructing vertebrate communities and for assessing ecosystem response to natural environmental and climatic change (Behrensmeier and Kidwell, 1985; Kidwell and Bosence, 1991; Behrensmeier et al., 2000) on a volcanic island during the mid-Holocene.

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References


