



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

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### ABSTRACT

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/m<sup>2</sup> and comprising 50% of all known extinct and extant vertebrate species ( $n_s = 44$ ) 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 (~10%), 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 rediscovered at Mare aux Songes (MAS: 20°26'51.2" S; 57°41'23.5" E), with both macro- (including vertebrate and invertebrate fauna and flora) and microfossils. With more than 250 bone fragments/m<sup>2</sup>, 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 geological 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 Chalmers, 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 subfossil (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 infilled 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

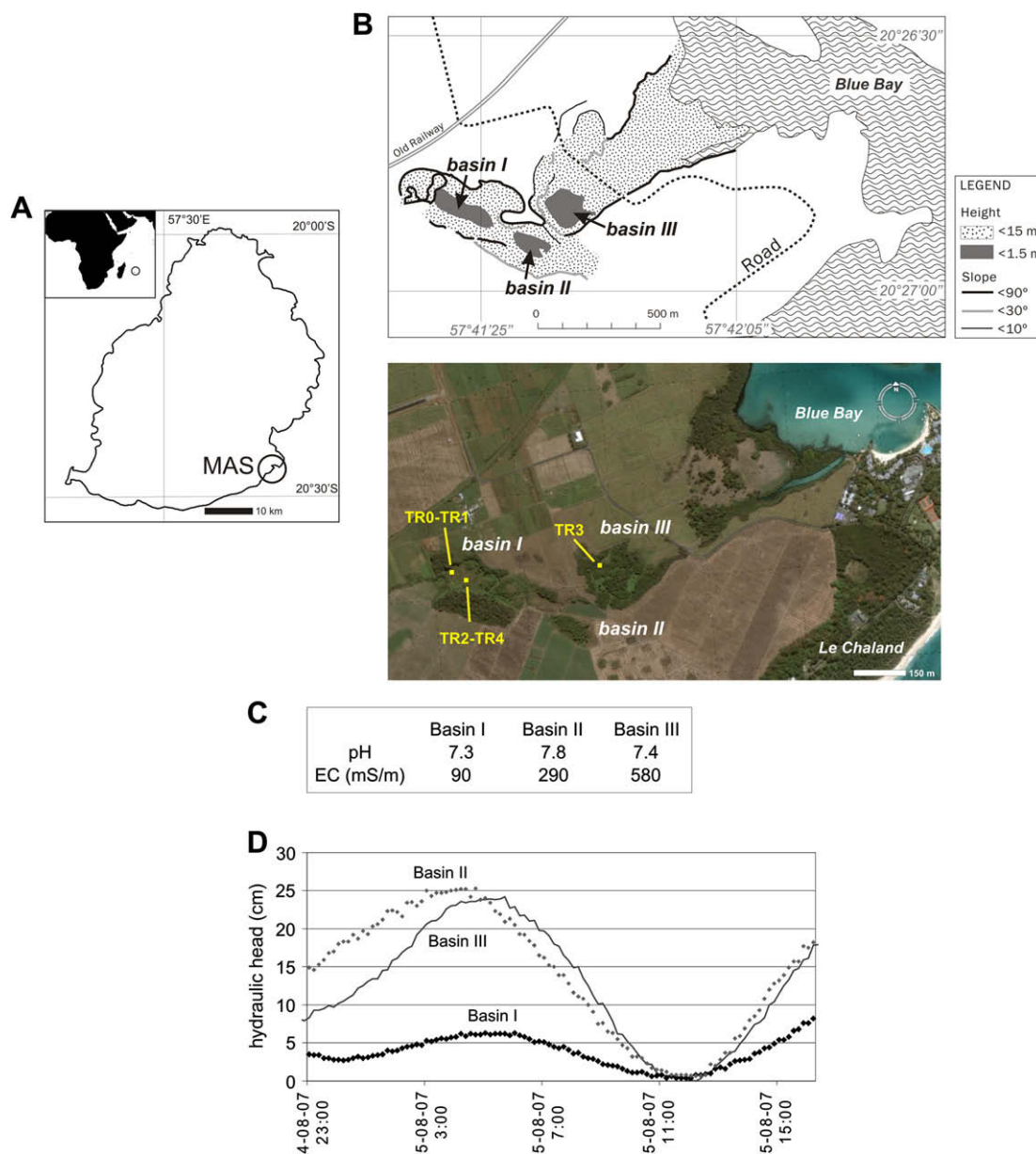
In 2005, a geomorphological survey was carried out, followed by a geophysical georadar and borehole survey (12 motorised rotary diamond drill cores with cross-sectional diameter of 100 mm). As a result of these surveys, three pits (14 m<sup>2</sup>) were excavated in sub-basin I and III (Fig. 1B) in 2006 using a shovel scoop of 0.64 m<sup>3</sup> (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 infilling 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 <sup>14</sup>C 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  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  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 monolith column (Liquid Chromatography Packings) using 0.1% trifluoroacetic in acetonitrile/H<sub>2</sub>O. 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



**Fig. 1.** (A) Top left, location of the volcanic island Mauritius; below Mare aux Songes (MAS). (B) Upper panel: Geomorphology of MAS, the thickness of lines indicates the steepness classes of the slopes. The position of sub-basins is indicated as basin I, II, and III. Lower panel: Google Earth Image of MAS and position of trenches (TR). The forested parts and scrub rich fields mark steepest slopes and wet depressions. (C) Table of electrical conductivity of the groundwater and surface water of sub-basins I, II and III. (D) Tidal fluctuations of the groundwater level at sub-basins I, II and III, measured between 5 and 11 August 2007.

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  $\text{pH} > 7$  (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

Up to 6 m of fine to medium (100–400  $\mu\text{m}$  diameter) grained bioclastic carbonate sands (layer B) overlie layer A (Fig. 2). The sand comprises sub-rounded to angular shell fragments, coral fragments and foraminifera. Locally, the sands are mixed with dolerite gravels (5–100 mm diameter), which are a result of mixing from the overlying dolerite gravel (layer E) during coring (see below). Layer B contains up to 250 mm diameter palm trunk bases and rootlets of ferns and palms. The sands from layer B are overlain by discontinuous 50–500 mm thick layers of gyttja (layer C) (Fig. 2).

#### 4.2.3. Unit C

The base of layer C comprises a grey fine-grained massive calcareous-gyttja with locally up to 100 mm thick horizontal laminae of very fine to medium grained carbonate sands (Fig. 1). Towards the top, the gyttja is brown and mixed with organic debris (wood, other plant fragments and seeds), and locally contains palm and fern rootlets and up to 30 mm thick tree branches. It is overlain by an up to 500 mm thick organic fossil layer (layer D) (Fig. 2).

#### 4.2.4. Unit D

Layer D is comprised entirely of fossil material, with elements dominated by woody plant remains and vertebrate bones set in a matrix of twigs, seed, nuts and piths. (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 m<sup>2</sup>, the density of vertebrate bone fragments of >4 mm amount to more than 250 bone fragments/m<sup>2</sup>. Cores, excavations and test pits indicate that within basins I and II, layer D extends over 3.7 ha.

#### 4.3.1. Vertebrates

Sub-basins I and III contain vertebrate fossils, whereas sub-basin II, infilled by a meters thick accumulation of anthropogenic dolerite boulders (layer E), did not yield vertebrate fossils. The sieved fraction of >4 mm vertebrate material comprises 22 of the presently recognised 44 Mauritian vertebrate species ( $n_s$ ), of which 13 are extinct (Cheke, 1987; Cheke and Hume, 2008) (Table 2). Specifically, it includes 54% ( $n_s = 24$ ) of endemic Mauritian birds, 33% ( $n_s = 15$ ) of endemic reptiles and 80% ( $n_s = 5$ ) of native mammals. Using minimum number criteria ( $n_i$ ), vertebrate species are dominated by the extinct giant tortoises *Cylindraspis triserrata* and *Cylindraspis inepta* (63%  $n_i = 294$ ), passerines (~10%  $n_i = 49$ ), small bats (7.8%  $n_i = 36$ ) and dodo (7.1%  $n_i = 33$ ) (Table 2).

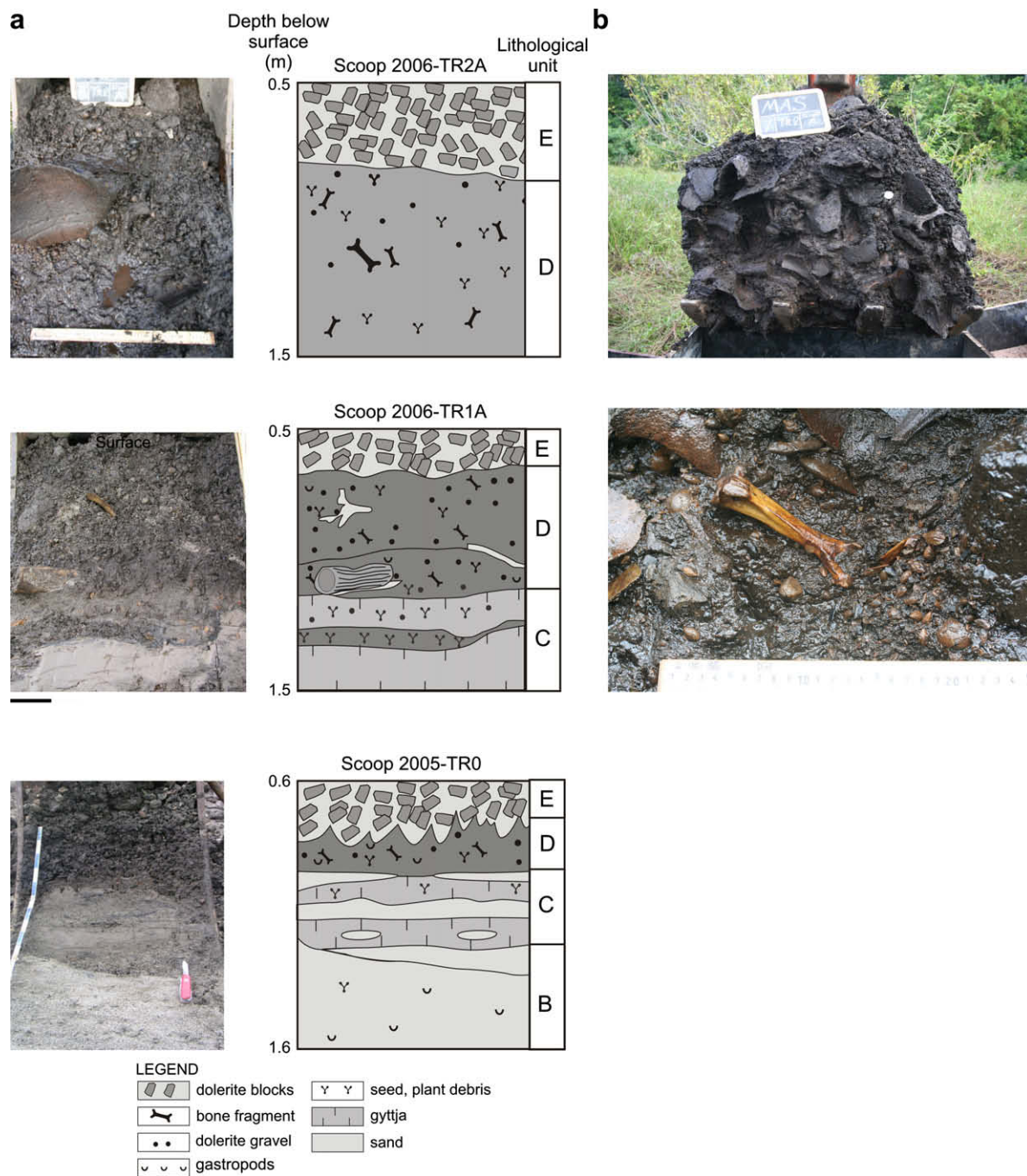
Although *in situ* articulation could not be assessed within the scoop samples, eight partly associated bone constellations (i.e. bone clusters belonging to one individual), dodo ( $n = 3$ ) (Fig. 3G) and giant tortoise ( $n = 5$ ), were identified, suggesting partial *in situ* articulation occurs. Bones exhibit a wide range of taphofacies, particularly bioerosional decay, rootlet marks and plant tannin stains (see Hume, 2005). More than 60% of the elements exhibited minor bio-erosion, with pitting and etching of bone surface, while probable mechanical damage and possible raptor predation (see below) have resulted in an abundance of >4-mm diaphyses (bone shafts). Fragmented tortoise carapace dominates the bone assemblage (86%  $n_f$  = number of bone fragments: 3821), but undamaged fragile bones are also present including crania, sterna, maxillae and fine bones, e.g. skulls, avian beaks, ribs, vertebrae and pedal phalanges. Cranial elements include adult and juvenile tortoise *Cylindraspis* sp., rails (*Aphanapteryx bonasia*), parrots (*Lophosittacus mauritianus* and *Psittacula bensoni*), fruit bats (*Pteropus niger* and *Pteropus subniger*) and scincid lizards (*Leiopisma mauritiana* and *Leiopisma telfairi*). The retrieval of numerous small elements confirms that previously collected museum fossil material, which was dominated by larger vertebrate material, particularly dodo, is due at least partly to sampling bias rather than taphonomic bias (Hume, 2005).

#### 4.3.2. Invertebrates (gastropods and insects)

Five endemic terrestrial (5.6%,  $n_s = 89$ ) and four endemic and/or native aquatic (40%,  $n_s = 10$ ) gastropods are identified, ranging in size from 1 to 25 mm (Table 2; Fig. 3D; Griffiths and Florens, 2006).

All insect samples contain well-preserved insect material, including a wide range of beetles (e.g. Fig. 3E), bugs, ants and other Hymenoptera, and Chironomidae, amounting to more than 40 species. Oribatid mites and spider fragments are also present. Several species of scarabaeine dung-beetle were recovered, a group presently restricted to upland forest on Mauritius (Motala et al., 2007). Although no physical remains of fig trees (*Ficus*) have been discovered, it is probable that at least one species was present, as fig wasps of several genera have been recovered from the fossil assemblage. Larger samples are required to fully assess the diversity and significance of the insect fauna, which is part of ongoing research.





**Fig. 2.** (A) Photographs and sedimentology of 800 mm wide mechanical digger-scoop samples 2006-TR1A, 2006-TR2A and 2005-TR0. Scoop samples are selected to show sedimentological variation of layers B, C, D and E. Depths are below present surface (1 m above mean sea level) and are accurate  $\pm 250$  mm. Samples TR1 and TR0 lie within 10 m distance from each other. Sample TR2A lies within 50 m from TR1 and TR0. (B) Top panel: image of digger-scoop sample 2006-TR1A before removal of material. Note the richness in vertebrate fossils (layer D), dominated by tortoise carapace fragments and post-cranial bones. Scale: scoop width = 800 mm. Bottom panel: image shows detail of fossil layer D (2006-TR1A) with tarsometatarsus of dodo in plantar aspect surrounded by matrix material consisting out of amorphous peat, palm piths and seeds of *Pandanus vandermeeshii* and *Sideroxylon grandiflorum*. Ruler for scale.

#### 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.

**Table 1**  
Carbon, nitrogen isotope analyses and thermal ages.

Lab. no. <sup>a</sup>	Latin name <sup>b</sup>	MTMD core 1996 <sup>c</sup>	Sample location 2005 <sup>d</sup>	Bed <sup>e</sup>	Bone element	Extracted fraction	<sup>14</sup> C age BP	Error (1σ)	Calibrated <sup>14</sup> C age, cal BC (1σ)	Thermal age <sup>f</sup>	δ <sup>13</sup> C (‰)	δ <sup>15</sup> N (‰)
GrA-31362	<i>Raphus cucullatus</i> 1	-	Trench 0	D	Femur	Collagen	3865	40	2295–2145	49	-21.60	6.59
GrA-31363	<i>Raphus cucullatus</i> 1 <sup>b</sup>	-	Trench 0	D	Femur	Collagen	3905	40	2435–2205	49	-21.51	
GrA-31364	<i>Raphus cucullatus</i> 2	-	Trench 0	D	Tibiotarsus	Collagen	3850	40	2285–2145	49	-20.85	5.30
GrA-31367	<i>Raphus cucullatus</i> 2 <sup>b</sup>	-	Trench 0	D	Tibiotarsus	Collagen	3860	40	2295–2145	49	-21.13	
GrA-31368	<i>Sideroxylon grandiflorum</i>	-	Trench 0	D	-	Seeds	3875	40	2335–2150	49	-28.14	
GrA-31372	<i>Cylindraspis</i> sp. 510 cm	CH5	-	D?	Carapace	Collagen	3890	40	2345–2205		-21.86	4.84
GrA-31373	<i>Cylindraspis</i> sp. 510 cm <sup>b</sup>	CH5	-	D?	Carapace	Collagen	3875	40	2335–2150	49	-21.56	
GrA-31374	<i>Cylindraspis</i> sp. 398 cm	CH5	-	D?	Carapace	Collagen	3840	40	2285–2140	49	-21.72	4.82
GrA-31369	<i>Cylindraspis</i> sp. 398 cm <sup>b</sup>	CH5	-	D?	Carapace	Collagen	3885	40	2340–2200	49	-21.92	
GrN-30069	<i>Cylindraspis</i> sp.	-	Trench 0	D	2 bones	Collagen	3700	40	2115–1950	47	-22.16	4.17
GrN-30070	Unidentified branches	-	Trench 0	D	-	Wood	4030	25	2560–2535, 2490–2465		-27.71	
GrA-32107	<i>Pachystyla bicolor</i> <sup>g</sup>	-	-	D	-	Carbonate	4070	35	-		-8.64	

<sup>a</sup> Lab codes: GrA – Groningen AMS, GrN – Groningen Conventional.

<sup>b</sup> Indicates duplicate measurement.

<sup>c</sup> Sample picked from borehole carried out in 1993.

<sup>d</sup> Sample of location discovered in October 2005.

<sup>e</sup> Stratigraphic position is reconstructed from excavations in 2006. Uncertain interpretation (D?) is due to possible artifact caused by coring leading to caving.

<sup>f</sup> Estimated thermal age (Smith et al., 2003) for bone samples expressed as kyr at 10 °C (effective burial temperature 23.8 °C; WMO Station 6195000; Plaisance (20.435, 57.67)).

<sup>g</sup> The mollusc sample is not calibrated because it is subject to an unknown reservoir effect.

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 Seva-thian, 2005). Further species identification awaits the completion of a Mauritian wood anatomical database.

#### 4.4. Preservation conditions

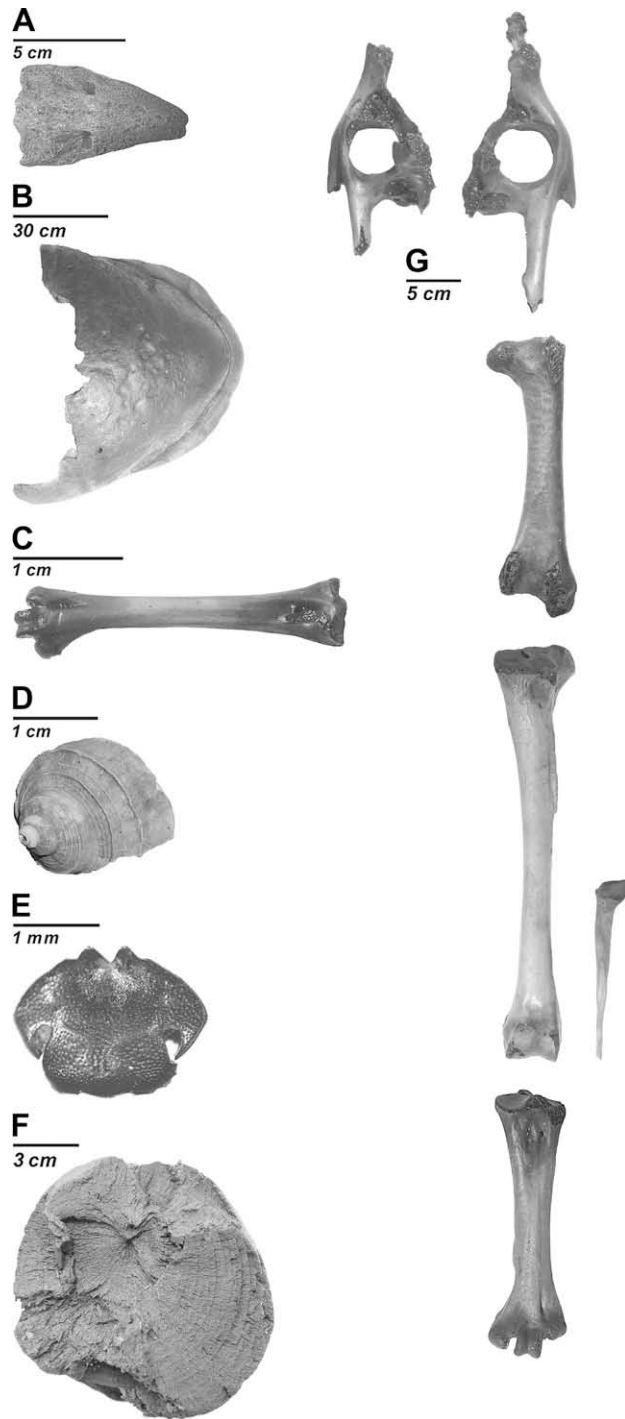
The preservation of vertebrate fossils at MAS can be explained by the presence of anaerobic, alkalic and slightly saline conditions of sediments and groundwater. An important factor in bone preservation is the alkaline condition of the fossil hosting sediments (layers B, C and D) and groundwater (pH values > 7), both conducive to bone preservation (Retallack, 1984; Nielsen-Marsh et al., 2007). In acidic volcanic settings as on Mauritius, alkalic conditions are rare and occur exclusively in the coastal belt (Willaime, 1984). In the coastal zone, the alkalinity is derived from dissolved CaCO<sub>3</sub> 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 mottling 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 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>, until 2 or 3 ka when it reached its present position (Camoïn et al., 2004). Neither seismic activity nor far-field equatorial ocean-syphoning induced sea level rises during the late Holocene (cf. Mitrović and Peltier, 1991; Peltier, 1991; Mitrović and Milne, 2002) occurred in this part of the Indian Ocean (Camoïn et al., 1997, 2004; Zinke et al., 2003). Sea level rise since the Last



**Fig. 3.** Selection of sub-fossils. (A) *Cylindraspis* sp. (terminal tail vertebra); (B) *Cylindraspis* sp. (distal carapace); (C) *Nesoenas mayeri* (Tarsometatarsus); (D) *Tropidophora carinata*; (E) dorsal view of the head of scarabaeine dung-beetle (Coleoptera: Scarabaeidae); (F) tree stem showing concentric rings; (G) associated dodo pelvic elements (distal end pelvis) found within a cluster, suggesting skeletons may be partly articulated. From top to bottom: Pelvis (distal fragments); Femur; Tibiotarsus; Fibula; Tarsometatarsus.

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 carcasses, 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 material (e.g. tortoise skull with jaw bones). Disarticulation within the depository 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  $2000 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$  exceed the annual rainfall of  $1200\text{--}1500 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$  (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.

Vertebrates (extinct <sup>a</sup> )		Minimum number of individuals collected in 2005/6/7 of 8681 total bone fragments.	
	Popular name	Element type	Number
<i>Cylindraspis triserrata/inepta</i> <sup>a</sup> (Testudinidae)	Giant tortoise	Femur	159
<i>Cylindraspis triserrata/inepta</i> <sup>a</sup> (Testudinidae)	Giant tortoise	Humerus	135
<i>Phelsuma cf guimbeaui</i> (Geckoniidae)	Day gecko	Humerus	7
<i>Leiopisma mauritiana</i> <sup>a</sup> (Scincidae)	Giant skink	Mandible	20
<i>Leiopisma telfairii</i> (Scincidae)	Telfair's skink	Humerus	3
<i>Phoenicopiterus ruber</i> <sup>a</sup> (Phoenicopiteridae)	Greater flamingo	Tarsometatarsus	3
<i>Aphanapteryx bonasia</i> <sup>a</sup> (Rallidae)	Red rail	Tarsometatarsus	4
<i>Circus maillardi</i> <sup>a</sup> (Accipitridae)	Mauritius harrier	Tarsometatarsus	3
<i>Fulica newtoni</i> <sup>a</sup> (Rallidae)	Mascarene coot	Humerus	2
<i>Raphus cucullatus</i> <sup>a</sup> (Columbidae)	Dodo	Pelvis [tarsometatarsus]	33 [300] <sup>b</sup>
<i>Nesoenas mayeri</i> <sup>a</sup> (Columbidae)	Pink pigeon	Tarsometatarsus	2
<i>Lophopsittacus mauritianus</i> <sup>a</sup> (Psittacidae)	Broad-billed parrot	Mandible	7
<i>Lophopsittacus' bensoni</i> <sup>a</sup> (Psittacidae)	Grey parrot	Palatine	2
<i>Mascarenotus sauzieri</i> <sup>a</sup> (Strigidae)	Sauzier's owl	Unguals	2
<i>Coracina typica</i> (Campephagidae)	Cuckoo-shrike	Tibiotarsus	1
<i>Hypsipetes olivaceus</i> (Pycnonotidae)	Olive bulbul	Tarsometatarsus	1
<i>Foudia rubra</i> (Ploceidae)	Mauritius fody	Radix; ulnae	~ 27
<i>Zosterops</i> sp. (Zosteropidae)	Mascarene White eye	Radix; ulnae	~ 20
<i>Pteropus niger</i> (Megachiroptera)	Greater fruit bat	Mandible	9
<i>Pteropus subniger</i> (Megachiroptera)	Lesser fruit bat	Mandible	5
<i>Tadarida acetabulosus</i> (Microchiroptera)	Mascarene freetailed bat	Phalanges	20
<i>Taphozous mauritianus</i> (Microchiroptera)	Grey tomb bat	Phalanges	16
Total individuals			461
Invertebrates	Habitat	Status (IUCN threat category)	
<i>Cyclotopsis conoidea</i>	Land	Mascarene endemic (endangered)	
<i>Tropidophora carinata</i> <sup>a</sup>	Land	Mascarene endemic (extinct)	
<i>Tropidophora fimbriata</i>	Land	Mascarene endemic (least concern)	
<i>Omphalotropis variegata</i>	Land	Mauritian endemic (least concern)	
<i>Pachystyla bicolor</i>	Land	Mascarene endemic (vulnerable)	
<i>Melanoides tuberculata</i>	Fresh and brackish water	Native (least concern)	
<i>Neritina gagates</i>	Fresh and brackish water	Native (least concern)	
<i>Bulinus cernicus</i>	Freshwater	Mauritian native (least concern)	
<i>Gyraulus mauritianus</i>	Freshwater	Mauritian endemic? (least concern)	
<i>Physa acuta</i>	Freshwater	Introduced from North America (not applicable)	
<i>Subulina octona</i>	Land	Introduced from Tropical America (not applicable)	
<i>Allopeas</i> sp	Land	Introduced from Tropical Africa (not applicable)	
Flora	Common name	Habitat	Status (IUCN threat category) (estimated population)
<i>Foetidia mauritiana</i> (Lecythidaceae)	Bois Puant	Dry forest	Extant (vulnerable) (~ 2000)
<i>Latania loddigesii</i> (Arecaceae)	Blue Latan	Dry forest	Extant (endangered) (~ 1000)
<i>Latania cf lontaroides?</i> (Arecaceae)	–	Dry forest	Extinct
<i>Pandanus vandermeeshii</i> (Pandanaceae)	Vacoas	Dry forest	Extant (vulnerable) (~ 2000)
<i>Sideroxylon boutonianum</i> (Sapotaceae)	Bois de Fer	Dry forest	Extant (critically endangered) (~ 250)
<i>Stadmania oppositifolia</i> (Sapindaceae)	Bois de Fer	Dry forest	Extant (vulnerable) (~ 2000)
<i>Terminalia bentzoe</i> (Combretaceae)	Bois Benjoin	Dry forest	Extant (vulnerable) (~ 2000)
<i>Cassine orientalis</i> (Celastraceae)	Bois d'Olive	Wet and dry forests	Extant (least concern) (> 100,000)
<i>Dictyosperma album</i> (Arecaceae)	Hurricane palm	Wet and dry forests	Extant (least concern) (14 in wild, 1000s cultivated)
<i>Cyathia</i> sp.(Cyatheaceae)	Fandia	Wet forest	–
<i>Canarium paniculatum</i> (Burseraceae)	Bois Colophane	Wet forest	Extant (endangered) (~ 2000)
<i>Elaeocarpus integrifolius</i> (Elaeocarpaceae)	–	Wet forest	Extant (critically endangered) (~ 200)
<i>Eugenia elliptica</i> (Myrtaceae)	Bois Clou	Wet forest	Extant (endangered) (~ 500)
<i>Pandanus iceryi</i> (Pandanaceae)	Vacoas	Wet forest	Extant (critically endangered) (150)
<i>Pandanus cf macrostigma</i> (Pandanaceae)	Vacoas	Wet forest	Extant (critically endangered) (3)
<i>Sideroxylon grandiflorum</i> (Sapotaceae)	Tambalacoque	Wet forest	Extant (endangered) (~ 1000)
<i>Antirhea borbonica</i> (Rubiaceae)	Bois Lousteau	Wet forest and upland heath and marshes	Extant (least concern) (~ 30,000)
<i>Pandanus cf barklyi</i> (Pandanaceae)	Vacoas	Upland marshes	Extant (endangered) (200)
Indetermined (Cyperaceae)	–	–	Unknown
<i>Diospyros</i> sp. (Ebenaceae)	–	–	Unknown

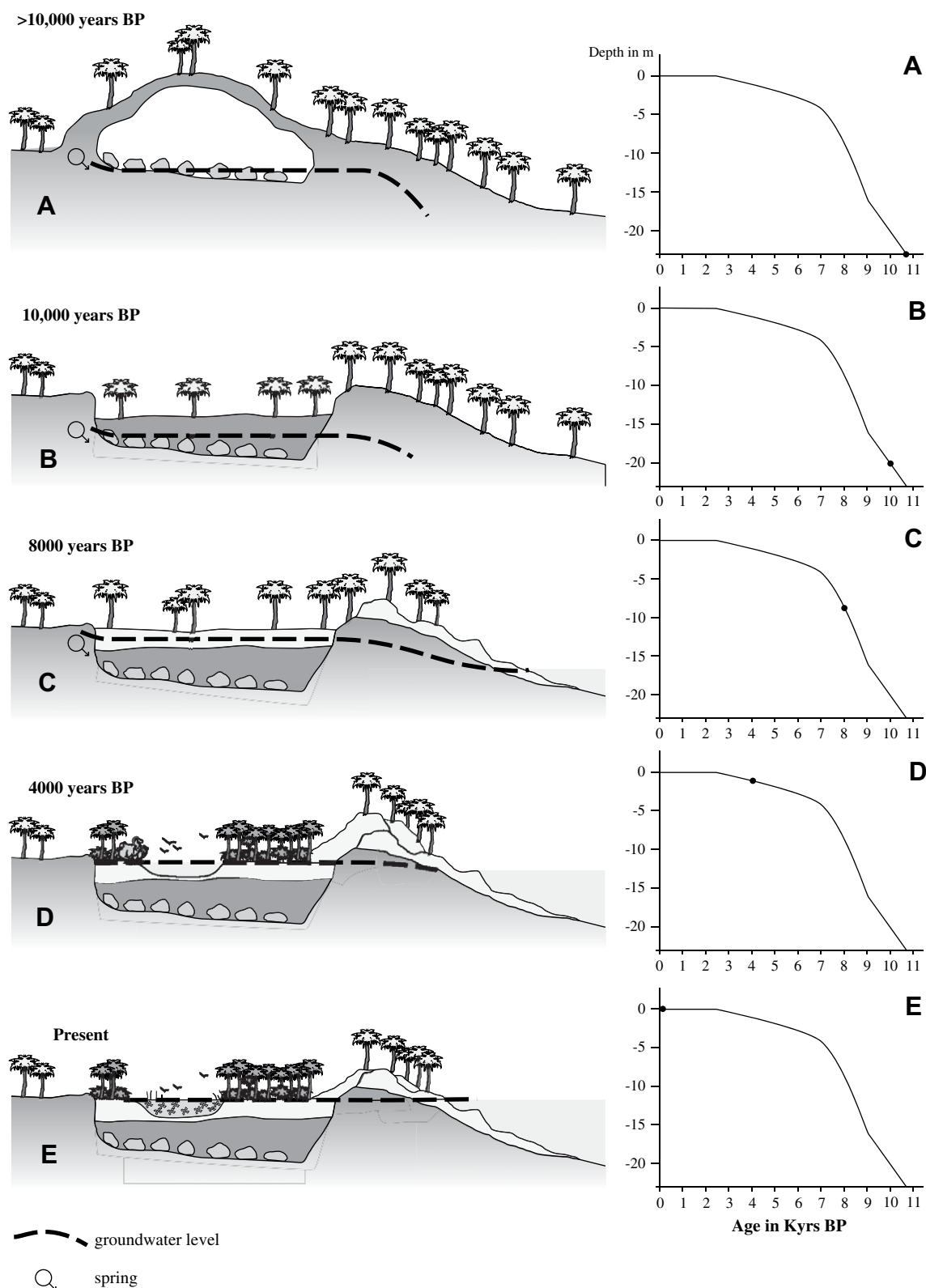
Vertebrates' minimum number of individuals; estimates based on single bone elements that characterise single individuals.

<sup>a</sup> Extinct species.<sup>b</sup> Minimum number of individuals collected in previous excavations.

community. The landscape was covered by dry forest, marsh and wet forest (Table 2). Most notably, it included wet forest canopy trees such as *S. grandiflorum* (Sapotaceae) and *C. paniculatum* (Burseraceae) that are currently confined to altitudes of 150–800 m receiving annual rainfall of 2500–4500 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>. The occurrence of wet and marsh species within the MAS basin indicates that the locality provided a suitably wet environment for these wet forest species to survive. The attraction of a mixed plant community,

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 sustaining a large population of dodo and giant tortoise, for which stable isotope ratios  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  (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  $^{14}\text{C}$  measurements, including two dodo metatarsi) yields a weighted averaged  $^{14}\text{C}$  age of  $3870 \pm 20$  BP. This corresponds to the calibrated intervals ( $1\sigma$ ) 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. grandiflorum* seeds randomly selected from MAS ( $n = 117$ ) indicate that they reached full size while still attached to the parent plant. Any catastrophic (e.g. cyclonic) event would have produced a mix of mature and immature sized fruits as these occur simultaneously on the plant. The presence of well-preserved tree stems mixed with sub-rounded coalified wood remains also suggests accumulation through a longer time window. Furthermore, the seed-dominated matrix of layer D, lack of inorganic clastics  $>2$  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 stresses induced by regional aridification 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  $2200 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$  (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; Selden and Nudds, 2004). With a bone concentration  $>250$  fragments/ $\text{m}^2$  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 (Behrensmeyer and Kidwell, 1985; Kidwell and Bosence, 1991; Behrensmeyer et al., 2000) on a volcanic island during the mid-Holocene.

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