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The human dimension of biodiversity changes on islands

Sandra Nogué[1]*, Ana M. C. Santos[2,3,4,5], H. John B. Birks[6,7], Svante Björck[8], Alvaro Castilla-Beltrán[1], Simon Connor[9,10], Erik J. de Boer[11], Lea de Nascimento[12,13], Vivian A. Felde[6], José María Fernández-Palacios[12], Cynthia A. Froyd[14], Simon G. Haberle[9,10], Henry Hooghiemstra[15], Karl Ljung[8], Sietze J. Norder[16], Josep Peñuelas[17,18], Matthew Prebble[9,19], Janelle Stevenson[9,10], Robert J. Whittaker[20,21], Kathy J. Willis[22], Janet M. Wilmshurst[13,23], Manuel J. Steinbauer[24,25]*

´[1]School of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK.

[2]Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Changes (cE3c), Faculdade de Ciências, Universidade de Lisboa, 1749-016 Lisboa, Portugal/Azores Biodiversity Group and Universidade dos Açores, 9700-042 Angra do Heroísmo, Azores, Portugal.

[3]Global Change Ecology and Evolution Group (GloCEE), Department of Life Sciences, Universidad de Alcalá, 28805 Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Spain.

[4]Terrestrial Ecology Group (TEG-UAM), Departamento de Ecología, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 28049 Madrid, Spain.

[5]Centro de Investigación en Biodiversidad y Cambio Global (CIBC-UAM), Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 28049 Madrid, Spain.

[6]Department of Biological Sciences and Bjerknes Centre for Climate Research, University of Bergen, N-5020 Bergen, Norway.

[7]Environmental Change Research Centre, University College London, London WC1E 6BT, UK.

[8]Department of Geology, Lund University, SE-223 62 Lund, Sweden.

[9]School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, Australian Capital Territory 2601, Australia.

[10]Australian Research Center (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage, Australian National University, Australian Capital Territory 2601, Australia.

[11]Departament d'Estratigrafia, Paleontologia i Geociències Marines, Facultat de Ciències de la Terra, Universitat de Barcelona, Martí i Franquès s/n, 08028 Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain.

[12]Island Ecology and Biogeography Group, Instituto Universitario de Enfermedades Tropicales y Salud Pública de Canarias (IUETSPC), Universidad de La Laguna (ULL), 38200 La Laguna, Canary Islands, Spain.

[13]Long-term Ecology Laboratory, Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research, 7640 Lincoln, New Zealand.

[14]Department of Biosciences, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK.

[15]Department of Ecosystem and Landscape Dynamics, Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Dynamics (IBED), University of Amsterdam, 1098XH Amsterdam, Netherlands.

[16]Leiden University Centre for Linguistics. 2300 RA Leiden, Netherlands.

[17]CSIC, Global Ecology Unit CREAF-CSIC-UAB, Bellaterra, 08193 Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain.

[18]CREAF, Cerdanyola del Vallès, 08193 Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain.

[19]School of Earth and Environment, College of Science, University of Canterbury, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand.

[20]School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 3QY, UK.

[21]Center for Macroecology, Evolution and Climate, GLOBE Institute, University of Copenhagen, 2100 Copenhagen 2100, Denmark.

[22]Oxford Long-Term Ecology Laboratory, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 3PS, UK.

[23]School of Environment, University of Auckland, 1142 Auckland, New Zealand.

[24]Bayreuth Center of Ecology and Environmental Research (BayCEER) and Department of Sport Science, University of

Bayreuth, 95447 Bayreuth, Germany.

[25]Department of Biological Sciences, University of Bergen, N-5020 Bergen, Norway.

*Corresponding author. Email: s.nogue-bosch@soton.ac.uk (S.N); steinbauer@uni-bayreuth.de (M.J.S.)

Abstract

Islands are among the last regions on Earth settled and transformed by human activities, and they provide replicated model systems for analysis of how people affect ecological functions. By analyzing 27 representative fossil pollen sequences encompassing the past 5000 years from islands globally, we quantified the rates of vegetation compositional change before and after human arrival. After human arrival, rates of turnover accelerate by a median factor of 11, with faster rates on islands colonized in the past 1500 years than for those colonized earlier. This global anthropogenic acceleration in turnover suggests that islands are on trajectories of continuing change. Strategies for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration must acknowledge the long duration of human impacts and the degree to which ecological changes today differ from prehuman dynamics.

Globally, human activities dominate ecological systems (1, 2) and are considered the main drivers for accelerating contemporary ecosystem transformation (3–6). The pressing need to evaluate the extent and dimensions of human impacts and the desire to restore “wild” systems have sparked controversy concerning the value of establishing prehuman baselines (7–9) and about the nature and timing of the onset of the Anthropocene (10–12). Archaeological and other paleodata on human impacts in continental systems reveal an increasingly human-transformed planet intensifying around the end of the Pleistocene (2, 13, 14). The lengthy time frame of human modification of ecosystem dynamics in continental contexts, spanning periods of substantial postglacial climate change, complicates the definition of prehuman baselines and hinders the investigation of natural ecosystem processes (15, 16).

In contrast to continents, most remote oceanic islands were colonized by people relatively recently, within the past 3000 years, when climates were similar to present conditions (17). The recent nature of human settlement means that the archaeological, paleoecological, and climate records are often more precisely resolved on well-studied islands compared with continents and are potentially more relevant for understanding remnant ecosystems and informing conservation and ecosystem restoration agendas. Therefore, island ecosystems provide opportunities to quantify the critical ecological transition from prehuman to humandominated ecosystems (4, 15) and allow anthropogenic impacts on ecosystems to be placed within the context of long-term prehuman ecological dynamics (16–20). Although numerous studies have documented the timing, waves, and processes of species extinctions that accompanied human arrival on islands (18–24), paleoecological data networks now allow systematic quantification of ecosystem transformations on islands globally. Here, we analyzed fossil pollen time series for multiple independent islands from all the major archipelagos and oceans and across latitudes using a breakpoint regression approach to test for altered rates and directionality of pollen, and thus vegetation compositional turnover, connected with human colonization (25) withinan overall time frame of the past 5000 years. These time series ofmillennial-scale dynamics allow the assessment of whether the rates of vegetation compositional change consistently accelerated acrossmultiple islands after initial human arrival. Our method uses ordination analyses to characterize the major gradient of compositional variation in the pollen data for each island, quantifying the mean rate of change through time before and after human arrival (Fig. 1), thereby allowing us to assess how human populations affected islands differently from natural perturbations (23).

Our results show that human arrival systematically accelerated directional compositional change in island ecosystems (Figs. 1 and 2). Rates of pollen compositional turnover increased after human arrival by up to a factor of 11, with large differences among islands (i.e., a median of 10.7 times higher turnover after human arrival, with a mean of 20.8 ± 26.5 times higher turnover). This acceleration is a globally consistent pattern observed on 24 of 27 islands independently of current and past island area, latitude, isolation, and elevation of the sampling site [Fig. 3, B to G, and tables S3 and S4 (25)]. Islands that were settled more recently, such as the

Poor Knights archipelago in New Zealand (13th century) (19) and the Galápagos Islands (16th century) (26), show a steeper increase in the rate of turnover change (P = 0.008, R2 = 0.22; linear regression with logtransformed arrival time; Fig. 3A) than on islands where humans arrived >1500 years ago [e.g., New Caledonia (27) and Fiji (28)]. This indicates either that the islands settled earlier were more resilient to human arrival or, more likely, that the recent major compositional turnover observed is explained by introduced species, land use practices, and technology deployed by later settlers being more transformative than those of earlier settlers. In addition, those islands colonized >3000 years ago appear to show some declines in rates of compositional turnover toward the end of the sequence, although there are too few cases (n = 5) to draw firm conclusions.

For many islands, the model implementing a prescribed breakpoint at the time of human arrival closely fits the observed patterns in compositional turnover (Fig. 1). Human arrival estimates fall within the 95% confidence intervals of the optimal breakpoints (representing the greatest change in turnover in each record) for 41% of islands. Human arrival times are within 500 years of the optimal breakpoint for 70% of islands and within 1000 years for 81% of islands (median 329 years compared with 953 for randomized data simulations; table S5 and Fig. 2). There is no tendency for optimized breakpoints to be systematically earlier or later than estimated human arrival time (t test with null model of mean difference being 0, P = 0.27). A systematic difference would haveeither indicated earlier human arrival or delayed human impact. On some islands, initial human arrival is not associated with a major shift in turnover [Fig. 1 and fig. S1 (25)]. These results might reflect the specific local characteristics of the study site. For example, on La Gomera (Canary Islands), the sedimentary sequence was collected at an elevation of 1250 m above sea level in one of the largest remnant areas of laurel forest, where paleoecological analyses showed no evidence of human impacts (29). On other islands, e.g., Hispaniola, shifts in vegetation turnover differed from the time of human arrival, as estimated based on

archaeological or historical sources, suggesting a lag between colonization and onset of significant directional change (Fig. 1).

Our analysis also shows that ecological change is an integral part of island systems, with changes observed both before recorded human arrival [directional change in composition measured in standard deviations of pollen taxon turnover (SDptt) per 100years: median turnover 1.7×10^{-2} SDptt/100 years and mean turnover $4.0 \pm 6.8 \times 10^{-2}$ SDptt/100 years] and after human arrival (median turnover 14.7×10^{-2} SDptt/100 years and mean turnover $23.3 \pm 29.8 \times 10^{-2}$ SDptt/100 years)] (Fig. 2). Results show that the rate of directional turnover before human arrival was slower, in contrast to human agencies of change. Natural drivers of ecosystemchange on islands, operating before and alongside humans, include volcanic activities, fire, climate change (episodes such as the “Little Ice Age”), earthquakes, extreme weather events (e.g., droughts and cyclones), and sea-level fluctuations (20, 30, 31). Although notmeasurable with the precision necessary to include formally within our analysis, volcanic activities and natural climate fluctuations have likely not increased over the analyzed time frame across the islands studied and thus cannot explain the systematic increase and varied timing of directional turnover observable across islands (25). Climate warming in the past 50 years, by contrast, is too recent to be detectable within our dataset. Over the time frame of the past 5000 years, direct human impacts greatly outweighed other processes that shaped island iodiversity and species interactions (32, 33).

Moreover, ecological legacies of human arrival on islands may persist for centuries and are often irreversible. An example is Tawhiti Rahi in the Poor Knights archipelago, which is currently uninhabited (19). Immediately after initial arrival by Polynesians in the 13th century, the island’s forest cover was cleared by fire for human habitation and gardens. After a massacre of local Ngatiwai inhabitants on Tawhiti Rahi in1820, local kaitiaki (guardians) declared the islands wahi tapu (protected by a sacred covenant), after which time there was no subsequent settlement. Despite the island becoming totally reforested within 150 years, the current forest composition is completely different from that of the prehuman period. In contrast to the Poor Knights archipelago, most currently inhabited islands have experienced at least two distinct waves of settlement, each having distinctive signatures of change and leaving increasingly complex legacies (24, 30).

Preparing and managing for ecosystemchange is one of the major challenges that island societies currently face as islands experience continued or accelerated threats from detrimental land use practices (12), new species invasions (24, 34), sea-level rise (35), and climate change (11, 17), in addition to naturally occurring disturbances. The challenges are made more difficult because these processes are affecting native ecosystems where vegetation communities have already been severely degraded or lost, species have gone extinct (15, 21), and important mutualistic plant–animal interactions have been disrupted (36).

Our results show little indication that these human-affected ecosystems are either similar to or returning to the dynamic baselines observed before human arrival. Therefore, anthropogenic impacts on islands are lasting components of these systems typically involving initial clearance (e.g., using fire) and are compounded by the introduction of a range of introduced species and extinctions of endemic species and ongoing disturbances. This contrasts with turnover after natural disturbances in the prehuman period, when island ecosystems often recovered rapidly to predisturbance states [e.g, (20, 31)].Whereas formany islands, widescale return to precolonization ecosystems is an unrealistic goal, paleoecological data such as those analyzed here may serve to inform targeted ecosystem restoration efforts within islands, providing insights into previous system states and their responsiveness to global change processes (9, 37).

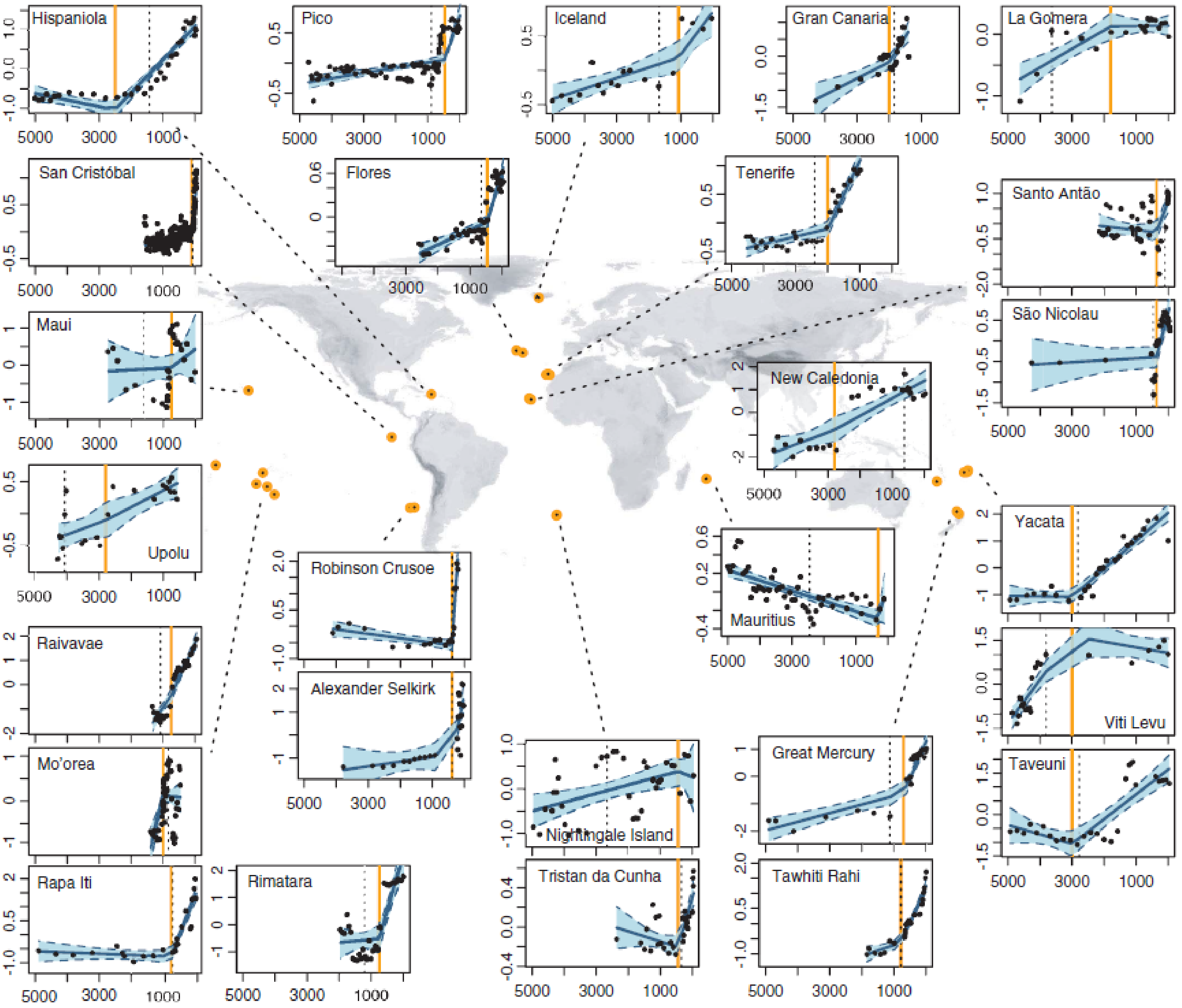

Fig. 1. Human arrival accelerated compositional turnover on islands. Global analysis of rate of palynological and thus vegetation compositional turnover (slope of the line) for 27 representative fossil pollen records from sedimentary sequences on islands. The *x*-axes represent calibrated years before present (i.e., years before 1950) calculated using Bayesian age-depth models for each island (*25*). The *y*-axes represent the major gradient in pollen composition quantified by the ordination

axis 1 scores of separate detrended correspondence analyses (DCAs) of each sequence. The units are measured in DCA axis scores, which approximate the SD_{ptt}, with an SD of 4 corresponding roughly to 100% compositional turnover. These plots show results of breakpoint analyses of the rate of compositional turnover with the date of recorded human arrival as the prescribed breakpoint. The recorded date of human arrival is indicated by the vertical orange lines (see table S3 for details). Scaling varies among panels. Shaded areas (blue) depict 95% confidence intervals of the models. A second continuous breakpoint analysis detecting the major statistical change point in turnover rate intrinsic was applied to the data. This "optimized breakpoint" is indicated by the vertical dashed black lines.

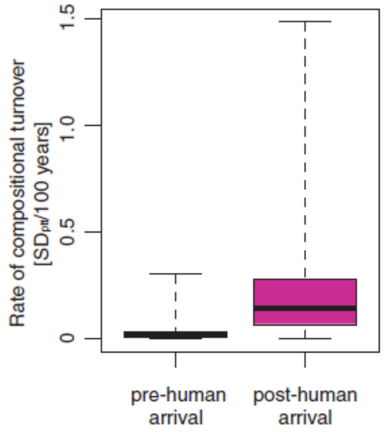

Fig. 2. Rates of turnover before and after human arrival. Change in the rate of pollen compositional turnover before (left) and after recorded date of human settlement (purple) for the time series of fossil pollen records for each of 27 islands globally, where each island's sequence has been subject to a separate ordination analysis using DCA. Rate of pollen taxon turnover is quantified as the absolute slope in the relationship between ordination scores of the first axis of each DCA with time. The units approximate SD_{ptt}/100 years. The presettlement rate of compositional turnover is represented on the left (median: 1.7×10^{-4}; mean: 4.0×10^{-4}) and the rate after human arrival is represented on the right (median: 14.7×10^{-4}; mean: 23.3×10^{-4}). The difference is highly significant ($P < 0.004$; paired *t*-test). See (*21*) for details.

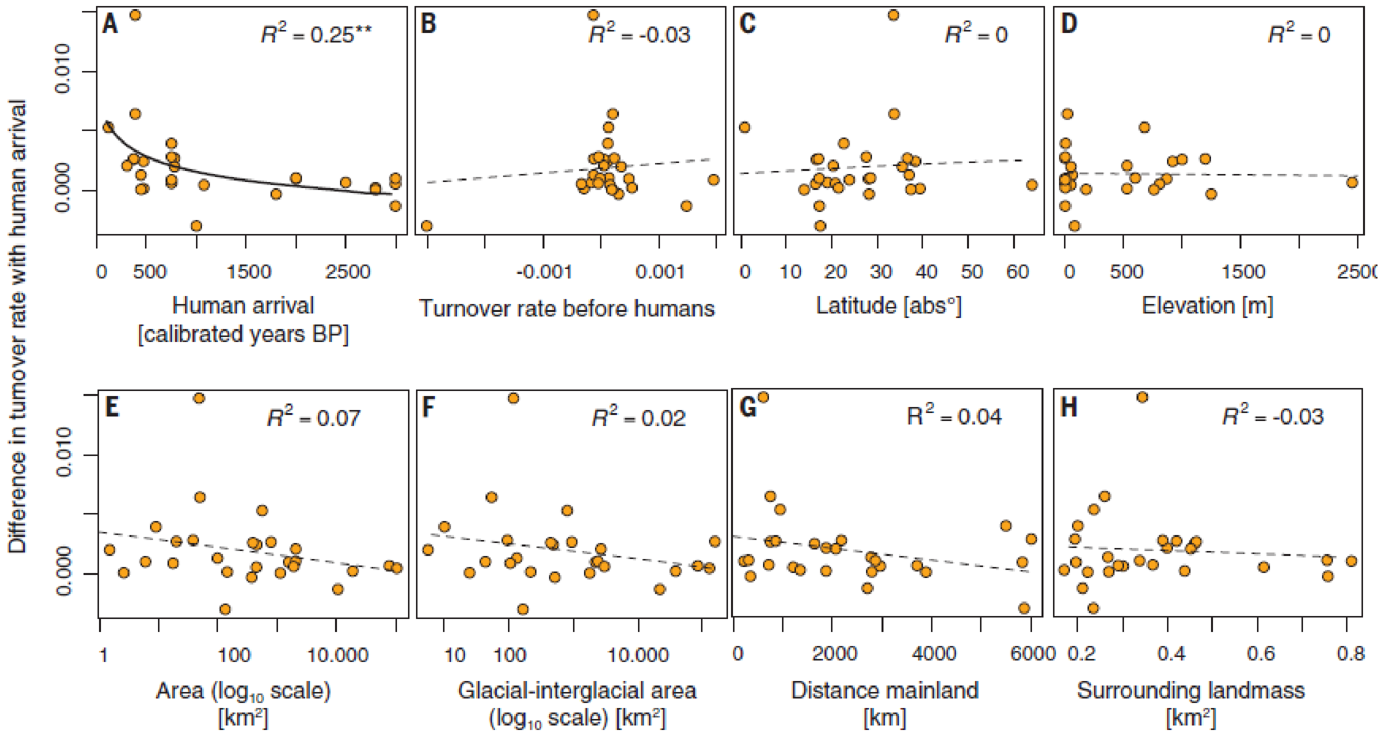

Fig. 3. Differences between the prehuman and human-dominated turnover scale with human arrival times. Relationships between the change in the rate of pollen compositional turnover before and after human arrival and several island features showing a curvilinear decrease in observed turnover as the time elapsed since the first colonization increases (A), but no relationship with turnover rate before human arrival (B), latitude (C), elevation of the coring site (D), island area (E), glacial-interglacial area (F), isolation (represented by distance to mainland) (G), or surrounding landmass (H). $^{**}P < 0.01$ (A).

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