

South Pacific Island's earliest inhabitants relied primarily on foraging, not horticulture

March 5 2014

Early Lapita inhabitants of Vanuatu, a South Pacific Island, ate fish, marine turtles, and wild or domestic animals, rather than relying on horticulture during early colonization, according to a study published March 5, 2014, in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Rebecca Kinaston from University of Otago in New Zealand and colleagues.

Around 3000 BP, human populations with cultural and biological links to South East Asian islands, a culture or people known as Lapita, sailed to Remote Oceania (islands of the tropical Pacific Ocean) with domestic plants and [animals](#), a 'transported landscape,' which enabled the settlement of previously uninhabited Pacific islands in the area. However, the extent to which the Lapita people and their [domestic animals](#) relied on the transported landscape at Vanuatu, a sparse island, compared with native flora and fauna during the initial settlement period, remains uncertain. Scientists analyzed the nitrogen, carbon, and sulfur isotopes from the bone collagen of adults, excavated from the Lapita cemetery of Teouma on Efate Island, Vanuatu (ca 3000-2900 BP) against a dietary baseline, measured using both modern and prehistoric plants and animals, to assess the paleo diet of some of Vanuatu's earliest inhabitants.

The authors found that the nitrogen and carbon levels indicate that humans foraged for food, and that dietary protein at Teouma included a mixture of reef fish, [marine turtles](#), fruit bats, and domestic land animals. Horticultural foods were likely grown and eaten at Teouma, but may not have been relied on heavily during the earliest settlement in

Vanuatu. Males displayed significantly higher nitrogen values compared to females, possibly suggesting dietary differences associated with labor specialization or sociocultural practices relating to food distribution. Finally, the carbon levels in the settler's domestic pigs and chickens imply a diet of primarily plants, but their nitrogen levels indicate that they were also eating foods such as insects or human fecal matter, a diet of free range rather than pasture.

More information: Kinaston R, Buckley H, Valentin F, Bedford S, Spriggs M, et al. (2014) Lapita Diet in Remote Oceania: New Stable Isotope Evidence from the 3000-Year-Old Teouma Site, Efate Island, Vanuatu. *PLoS ONE* 9(3): e90376. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0090376](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0090376)

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