The focus of this volume is on human claims to land in Madagascar, and the shifting relationship over time between the island's peoples and the environment. These are complex issues and we are reminded of the "The Land Ethic" idea proposed by Aldo Leopold in which he argues that "There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow on it" (Leopold 1987: 237). Leopold challenges us to view conservation as a state of harmony between humans and land with a broader understanding of ecological conservation (Leopold 1987: 243). According to Leopold, an understanding of ecology should embrace concepts from geography, history, botany, agronomy and economics (Leopold 1987: 261). We would contend, that an understanding of the origins of the people occupying the land is equally important. In this context, this chapter reviews how humans first came to occupy Madagascar. In other words, who are the Malagasy and what is their relationship to one another?

The prehistoric settlement of Madagascar is one of the great mysteries of human migration (Burney 2005). The significance of understanding prehistoric times has been recognised in recent years as an important element in planning for the future in terms of ecological and cultural restoration (Burney 2005)—both of which are largely shaped by human-environment interactions. Early French botanists painted a picture of the landscape of Madagascar as being densely covered by forests, and suggested that when the proto-Malagasy arrived, they proceeded to burn the landscape thereby transforming it to grassland and arid bushland.
Multiple independent lines of paleoecological research have suggested that people were present on the island around 2,300 years ago, but whether they settled then is still inconclusive from these data. For example, David Burney’s review of botanical clues to human presence in Madagascar indicates that the first occurrence of pollen of hemp (*Cannabis* sp.) in sediments throughout the island was identified around this time (Burney 2005: 387). In addition, the record is consistent with decreasing amounts of pollen of woody species and an increase in ruderal (disturbance-adapted) pollen types, a large increase in microscopic charcoal particles in sediments, decline of dung-fungus spores, and earliest evidence of butchery of large animals that later become extinct.

Ethnobotanical data have also provided clues in tracing the geographic origin of the earliest Malagasy people. Early Asian plants introduced to Madagascar include hemp, which was thought to have been brought from Asia to Africa by Indonesian traders over two millennia ago, certain coconut varieties (*Cocos nucifera* L.), the banana (*Musa acuminata Xbalbisiana* Colla.), and rice (*Oryza sativa* L.) (Burney 2005: 387). Fossil pollen also provides evidence of a subsequent human migration from Africa to Madagascar. The castor bean (*Ricinus communis* L.), an African plant valued for medicinal and insecticidal qualities, appears in the pollen record of Madagascar’s highlands about 1000 years ago (Burney 1987: 137). Burney suggests that the re-appearance of *Sporormiella* spores, a likely indicator for livestock, in the same sediment probably signalled the advent of large-scale pastoralism in Madagascar. He further suggests that “…Islamized Indian Ocean traders, sometimes referred to as Swahili or Afro-Arab peoples, began colonizing the west coast of Madagascar about this time. These people would likely have brought castor beans and cattle-raising to the island” (Burney 2005: 387).

Human survival is dependent on the environment. It is therefore important, when exploring human-environment links in Madagascar in the context of conservation and development discourses, for scholars to examine (1) the nature and composition of prehuman environments; (2) when people arrived on the island, and who they were; (3) human subsistence and dependency on plants and animals; and (4) anthropometric landscape transformations and their consequences. In this paper, we