

Rethinking megafauna

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1 Rethinking megafauna

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49 Concern for megafauna is increasing among scientists and non-scientists. Many studies
50 have emphasized that megafauna play prominent ecological roles and provide important
51 ecosystem services to humanity. But, what precisely are “megafauna”? Here we
52 critically assess the concept of megafauna and propose a goal-oriented framework for
53 megafaunal research. First, we review definitions of megafauna and analyze associated
54 terminology in the scientific literature. Second, we conduct a survey among ecologists
55 and paleontologists to assess the species traits used to identify and define megafauna.
56 Our review indicates that definitions are highly dependent on the study ecosystem and
57 research question, and primarily rely on ad hoc size-related criteria. Our survey suggests
58 that body size is crucial, but not necessarily sufficient, for addressing the different
59 applications of the term megafauna. Thus, after discussing the pros and cons of existing
60 definitions, we propose an additional approach by defining two function-oriented
61 megafaunal concepts: “keystone megafauna” and “functional megafauna”, with its
62 variant “apex megafauna”. Assessing megafauna from a functional perspective could
63 challenge the perception that there may not be a unifying definition of megafauna that
64 can be applied to all eco-evolutionary narratives. In addition, using functional
65 definitions of megafauna could be especially conducive to cross-disciplinary
66 understanding and cooperation, improvement of conservation policy and practice, and
67 strengthening of public perception. As megafaunal research advances, we encourage
68 scientists to unambiguously define how they use the term “megafauna” and to present
69 the logic underpinning their definition.

70

71 **Keywords:**

72 apex predators, body size, etymology, functional traits, keystone species, large animals,
73 megaherbivores

74 **1. Introduction**

75 Prehistoric art provides evidence that megafauna (literally, “large animals”; see
76 [Appendix S1](#) for the etymology and popular definitions of this term) have fascinated
77 humans since our origins (e.g. [1]). The eminent nineteenth century naturalist Alfred
78 Russel Wallace [2] referred to megafauna as “the hugest, and fiercest, and strangest
79 forms”. A hundred and forty plus years later, however, megafaunal research still lacks a
80 unifying framework for the use of this term, which has diverged in the development of
81 disciplines as diverse as wildlife biology, oceanography, limnology, soil ecology,
82 evolutionary biology, conservation biology, paleontology, and anthropology. Thus,
83 definitions in the scientific literature include disparate combinations of species: from the
84 smallest organisms readily visible in photographs to the largest vertebrates ever on earth
85 (e.g. [3-5]; [Fig. 1, Appendix S2](#)). Given the great sociocultural significance of
86 megafauna [6-7], the ubiquity of the megafauna concept in addressing profound and
87 varied scientific questions [8-11], and the multiple threats that jeopardize large animals
88 [12-14], a re-examination of the concept is warranted [15].

89 Here we review the concept of megafauna and propose a goal-oriented
90 framework for megafauna research, which may support scientific endeavors, improve
91 conservation policy and practice, and strengthen public perception. To do this, we adopt
92 a two-pronged approach. First, we review the scientific literature to i) examine the
93 different definitions of megafauna and ii) analyze the terminology commonly associated
94 with the concept of megafauna. Second, we carry out a survey among ecologists and
95 paleontologists to iii) assess the traits of the species they consider as megafauna and iv)
96 identify the key criteria that should define megafauna. The goal of this survey is to
97 enhance our understanding of how researchers working with megafauna conceptualize
98 data that already exist in the scientific literature. Based on insights gained from the

99 review and survey, we propose a working scheme for the use of the megafauna concept,
100 discuss pros and cons of different definitions, and provide recommendations for
101 advancing interdisciplinary megafaunal research.

102

103 **2. Literature review**

104 **(a) Megafauna definitions**

105 We conducted a systematic review of existing megafauna definitions in the scientific
106 literature (276 articles reviewed; see [Appendix S3](#) for a complete list of references and
107 [Appendix S4](#) for the searching methods). The majority of megafauna articles focused on
108 terrestrial species (55% of the papers; mainly concerned with prehistorical times) and
109 marine ecosystems (52%; mostly referencing recent times), with very few articles
110 dealing with freshwater megafauna (1%; [Figs. 2 and S1](#)). Our search did not uncover
111 any paper dealing with soil megafauna, although soil ecologists use this term as well
112 [[16](#)].

113 When considering whether the reviewed papers provided definitions of the term
114 megafauna and how such definitions were justified, strikingly, 74% of the identified
115 articles did not provide an explicit definition of megafauna. Among the remaining 26%
116 (i.e. the 71 articles using a definition), 45% did not provide any argument or reference
117 to support the definition, whereas 25% provided references, 20% specified distinct
118 arguments, and 10% offered both references and arguments ([Fig. 2](#)). Definitions, when
119 provided, were somewhat idiosyncratic (i.e. varied according to the study system) and
120 relied on *ad hoc* size-related criteria (see [Table S1 and Fig. 1](#); for a complete list of
121 definitions, see [Table S2](#)).

122 Definitions of the megafauna concept were primarily of two types. The first
123 group used an explicit, albeit generally arbitrary, body-size threshold above which a

124 species is considered megafauna. Among the definitions of this group, a distinction can
125 be made between those that used a *mass*-based threshold and those that used a *length*-
126 based threshold.

127 On the one hand, mass thresholds ranging from around 10 kg to 2 tons have been
128 widely used in a terrestrial context to define megafauna [5]. Paleontologists, for
129 example, have often referred to the megafauna definition provided by Martin [4]: i.e.
130 animals, usually mammals, over 100 pounds (c. 45 kg; e.g. [17-20]). Recently, this
131 megafauna definition has also been applied to marine environments [21], and several
132 authors have adopted a slightly lower threshold (30 kg) to define freshwater megafauna
133 [14,22]. Some terrestrial megafauna studies (e.g. [23]) are based on the megaherbivore
134 concept of Owen-Smith [24,25], restricted to herbivores exceeding 1,000 kg in adult
135 body mass according to distinctions from smaller herbivores in a number of ecological
136 features. Other authors have applied guild-dependent thresholds for terrestrial
137 megafauna (e.g. ≥ 100 kg for herbivores and ≥ 15 kg for carnivores) [13]. Finally,
138 Hansen and Galetti [26] emphasized the importance of taking into account the
139 ecological context too: “one ecosystem’s mesofauna is another ecosystem’s
140 megafauna”. This means that relatively small species can also be considered megafauna,
141 as long as they are, or were, among the largest species occurring in a given area.

142 On the other hand, papers in which the megafauna definition relies on body
143 length are characterized by much smaller size thresholds. These studies have been
144 common in the context of benthic and epibenthic environments, where marine
145 megafauna are usually defined as animals visible on seabed photographs (normally over
146 c. 1 cm) or caught by trawl nets (e.g. [3,27-29]). Furthermore, soil ecologists have used
147 the term megafauna to encompass those species above 20 mm in length that exert strong
148 influences on gross soil structure [16].

149 The second major group of papers included those that relied on body size only
150 implicitly – i.e. considering megafauna as certain clades or groups of species that are
151 relatively large-sized within the focal study system. These articles normally concerned
152 aquatic environments. Several studies of marine benthic megafauna focused on
153 particular taxonomic groups, such as decapods and fish [30,31]. In a marine pelagic
154 context, some authors focused on the largest sea-dwelling species – i.e. marine
155 mammals, sea turtles and seabirds (termed “air-breathing marine megafauna”) [32],
156 along with sharks, rays, and other predatory fish (e.g. [33-35]) and even polar bears and
157 cephalopods [36]. In freshwater ecosystems, crustaceans, amphibians, and fish were
158 classified as megafauna by some authors [37]. Other work has focused on particular
159 functional groups, such as higher/apex marine predators [34,36]. It is noteworthy that
160 the term megafauna has been virtually ignored for dinosaurs and, until recently, barely
161 used for mammals other than those of the Late Pleistocene period. Instead, dinosaur
162 experts and wildlife biologists prefer using the species, clade, or group name rather than
163 the more general term megafauna (e.g. [38-41]).

164
165 **(b) Terminology associated with megafauna research.** As demonstrated above, the
166 megafauna definition may differ according to the studied ecosystem. In this section, we
167 highlight the fact that definitions also differ depending on the ecological and biological
168 questions of the study. To this end, we created semantic networks based on the terms
169 included in the title and abstract of the 276 reviewed articles, and identified thematic
170 clusters based on co-occurrence of these terms (see [Appendix S4](#) for methodological
171 details). From this, we obtained three major megafauna research clusters ([Figs. S1 and](#)
172 [S2](#)). The first cluster included articles on terrestrial megafauna and mainly corresponded
173 to the study of the extinction of Pleistocene megafauna: its timing, causes, and impacts

174 on ecosystems (e.g. [17,42,43]). The terms included in this terrestrial cluster were
175 related to the megafauna definitions provided by Owen-Smith [24] and, mostly, by
176 Martin [4]. The second cluster concerned extant benthic and epibenthic marine
177 megafauna: the characterization of their communities [44-46], the environmental factors
178 that determine their composition [47-49], and their ecological properties [9,30]. In
179 general, the terms of this cluster were linked to definitions not specifying a body-size
180 threshold [3,32]. The third cluster covered studies on the impacts of bycatch in fisheries,
181 mainly on marine air-breathing vertebrates [12,32,50], as well as on strategies for their
182 conservation [51,52].

183 These clusters were not totally disconnected, as Figure S2 reveals several
184 bridging terms that have the potential to link different clusters in the network [53]. For
185 example, terrestrial and pelagic clusters were recently connected by research on the
186 conservation of threatened vertebrates in relation to global change [54-57]. In this case,
187 important bridging terms were *impact*, *climate* and *review* (Figure S2). Similarly,
188 benthic and pelagic clusters were interlinked by research on biodiversity conservation in
189 marine environments [58], with *biodiversity*, *use*, and *fish* being bridging terms (Figure
190 S2). Thus, our lexical analysis revealed a growing, albeit still weak, tendency to connect
191 the different conceptual clusters that make up the main megafauna research network.
192 Our findings indicate that the increasing concern about the causes and consequences of
193 human impacts on the conservation of large animals has a promising potential to foster
194 collaboration among researchers focusing on different ecosystems (e.g. [59]).

195

196 **3. Survey of researchers**

197 Given that the majority of the papers using the concept megafauna do not provide a
198 definition of this term, we surveyed researchers working on megafauna to get a better
199 understanding of how they understand the concept when using it.

200

201 **(a) Species traits associated with megafauna.** To understand the species traits (i.e.
202 taxonomy, biology, ecology, behavior, conservation status and popularity; see [Tables](#)
203 [S3 and S4](#) for more details) that researchers associated with megafauna, we asked
204 ecologists and paleontologists ($n=93$ respondents) to fill in a questionnaire that included
205 photos of 120 animal species ([Table S3](#)). In the questionnaire, respondents had to
206 specify which species they considered as megafauna. Then we ranked species traits
207 according to their capacity to predict the probability that the respondents would classify
208 these species as megafauna (see [Appendix S4 and Tables S3-S5](#) for methodological
209 details). We found that adult body mass was by far the most important trait, followed by
210 taxonomic group; all other traits analyzed were of minor importance ([Fig. S3a](#)).

211 According to a Generalized Linear Model (GLM), body mass and taxonomic group
212 accurately predicted the probability that a species would be classified as megafauna
213 ($F_{15,104}=72.79$, $P<0.001$, $R^2=0.90$). Larger species were more likely to be considered as
214 megafauna, following a sigmoidal (logistic) relationship ([Fig. 3a](#)). However, the slope
215 of this relationship varied among taxonomic groups, as reflected by the significance of
216 the interaction coefficient ($F_{7,104}=4.13$, $P<0.001$; [Fig. 3b](#)). Mammals, birds and reptiles
217 had steeper slopes, fish species had intermediate values, and amphibians and
218 invertebrates exhibited shallower slopes ([Fig. 3b](#)). Thus, for a given body mass, the
219 classification of a species as megafauna depended on its taxonomy, likely reflecting a
220 bias arising from the prominence of terrestrial vertebrate species in scientific research or
221 the general (average) size of the species in the different groups. These patterns were

222 consistent despite variability in respondents' characteristics such as age and expertise
223 (see [Appendix S4](#) and [Figs. S3b and S4](#)).

224

225 **(b) What criteria should define megafauna?** We also used the questionnaire to assess
226 researchers' recommendations for defining megafauna. We explicitly asked the
227 respondents to choose among six criteria needed to define megafauna: body mass,
228 taxonomy, ecological function, ecological context, life history traits, and extinction risk.
229 Respondents could choose as many of them as they wanted and could also name
230 additional criteria (see [Appendix S4](#) for methodological details). Among the criteria
231 provided, 92% of respondents identified body mass as the key criterion ([Fig. S5](#)).
232 However, body mass was very often (86% of respondents) chosen in combination with
233 other criteria (mean total number \pm SD of criteria selected by respondents: 2.9 ± 1.3). This
234 suggests that body size alone is insufficient for defining megafauna. Extinction risk was
235 rarely taken into account in defining megafauna, probably because respondents
236 identified this criterion as a circular and extrinsic argument or because it cannot be
237 applied to extinct taxa, which frequently contributed to megafauna research. The
238 selection of criteria was again barely affected by respondents' characteristics (see [Table](#)
239 [S6](#), [Figs. S6 and S7](#)). Only 7% of the respondents suggested alternative criteria to define
240 megafauna. These additional suggestions (namely species' volume, habitat
241 requirements, "importance" within the food web, ecological "status", ecosystem and
242 temporal context) were closely related to the six criteria already provided in the
243 questionnaires.

244

245 **4. Rethinking the megafauna concept**

246 As evidenced in the literature, the term megafauna has been widely applied in

247 ecological and paleontological research. However, our literature review revealed that
248 researchers have been adopting a context-dependent use of the term, most often using
249 operational definitions with varying and largely arbitrary body-size thresholds and
250 taxonomic groups as proxies, depending on the study system and research question.
251 Only a few studies have explicitly emphasized the functional importance of the largest
252 species in a given ecosystem and over a specific period [16,24,26]. In addition, our
253 survey of researchers provided consensus that body size (e.g. body mass) is a crucial
254 descriptor, but not necessarily sufficient, for addressing the different applications of the
255 term megafauna.

256 When rethinking the megafauna concept, the primary question that should arise
257 is whether we need a threshold. As argued next, there are reasons that justify the search
258 for non-arbitrary thresholds and that indicate that these are, in fact, achievable, at least
259 in some cases. First, avoiding a threshold-based definition would make the use of the
260 megafauna term largely impractical. Second, clear breakpoints in either body size or
261 ecological features have been identified for some animal groups (see below). Thus, a
262 follow-up agenda exploring whether corresponding thresholds do, or do not exist in
263 different groups of organisms is needed.

264 Below, we reconsider the megafauna concept and propose a general working
265 scheme for its use in various ecological and evolutionary contexts. These include either
266 natural systems (i.e. before *Homo sapiens* began to defaunate them [26]) or systems that
267 have been impacted by human-mediated extinctions and introductions of wild and
268 domestic species [60].

269

270 **(a) The largest.** The central challenge in using a threshold concept to define megafauna
271 – as is also the case for other popular ecological terms such as keystone, flagship or

272 umbrella species (see [61]) – is how to empirically establish a metric (e.g. body mass, or
273 body length) and a corresponding value above which an animal may be effectively
274 regarded as megafauna. This value needs to be placed within a community or an
275 ecosystem context to make any sense. We could circumvent this threshold concept by
276 simply defining “megafauna” as *the subset of largest species in a community or an*
277 *ecosystem*. To answer the critical question of what the threshold should be, we could
278 follow two approaches. In its simplest form, we could refer to the *single* largest species.
279 Going beyond this, a transparent definition of “subset” requires exploring the frequency
280 distributions of body size (e.g. body mass) values within the community or ecosystem
281 under study, and determining a breakpoint in body size. Although body size data are not
282 available for all animal species within an ecosystem, this information is often biased
283 towards larger species [62].

284 Another approach would be to focus on particular clades or guilds to restrict the
285 species pool under consideration, facilitating the identification of megafauna. Thus,
286 “clade- or guild-specific megafauna” would be *the subset of largest species of a given*
287 *clade or guild in a community or an ecosystem*. This implies acknowledging that the
288 megafauna within a clade or guild do not necessarily include the largest species in the
289 ecosystem. Within phylogenetic lineages, body mass is skewed towards smaller sizes,
290 with larger species being almost invariably rarer than smaller species [24,63,64]. For
291 instance, >90% of sub-Saharan vertebrate herbivore species weigh <500 kg, while only
292 ca. 5% of species has a body mass exceeding 1000 kg [24]. However, most animals,
293 with the exceptions of birds and mammals, grow through prolonged ontogenetic stages.
294 For instance, giant bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) cover 5-6 orders of magnitude in
295 mass from larvae to adult [65]. Whether scales of ontogenetic change cause taxa with

296 long developmental changes in size to have a shallower slope than in cases where the
297 break might be more obvious needs to be investigated.

298

299 **(b) Operational definitions.** We refer to operational definitions as those using specific
300 body size criteria but that are not based on a body size distribution, namely most
301 definitions enumerated in [Tables S1 and S2](#). A prominent example is Martin’s definition
302 of megafauna (c. 45 kg [4]), which can be seen as a human-centered perspective,
303 partitioning animals similar or larger in size than humans from those smaller. These
304 definitions have been the core of the megafauna scientific literature, most likely because
305 of their obvious practical advantages. For instance, they facilitate data processing and
306 analysis, and they may normally apply to both extant and extinct species.

307 A main feature of operational definitions is their strong dependence on the
308 research discipline, which makes them highly applicable to conduct comparisons within
309 disciplines but strongly limits their trans-disciplinary use. However, some attempts have
310 recently been made to move certain operational definitions beyond the original research
311 context. In particular, the application or adaptation of Martin’s megafauna standard [4]
312 to aquatic environments [14,21,22] represents a connection among terrestrial, marine
313 pelagic, and freshwater megafauna research. In addition, soil and marine benthos
314 megafauna research, which is concerned with communities characterized by relatively
315 small-sized species, may be closely linked because they use similar – body length-based
316 – definitions. However, a weak connection between terrestrial/pelagic/freshwater and
317 soil/benthos megafauna research is anticipated due to their very different conceptions of
318 “mega” (see [Fig. 1](#)). Nevertheless, while operational definitions could seem conducive
319 to multidisciplinary coordination and collaboration in megafauna research (e.g. to
320 undertake biodiversity inventories and conservation status assessments), the application

321 of operational thresholds to different disciplines relies on the unrealistic assumption that
322 body mass (and functional traits; see below) distributions are comparable among
323 different communities or ecosystems. Thus, operational definitions, which are
324 inherently arbitrary, are at risk of including or ignoring species that respectively should
325 or should not be considered as megafauna, in both intra- and cross-disciplinary
326 approaches.

327

328 **(c) Functional definitions: looking for a new approach.** While some existing
329 definitions go beyond body size (e.g. [16,26]), we largely lack a conceptual definition of
330 megafauna that integrates the ecological function and functional traits of a species along
331 with its size (e.g. represented by body mass; but see 24; see Fig. 4). In this section, we
332 present a function-oriented framework for the use of the megafauna concept, therefore
333 responding to the general perception of researchers that body size alone is an
334 incomplete descriptor of megafauna (see above). Here, unlike previous definitions,
335 which were primarily based on body size, breakpoints are associated with biological and
336 ecological features/qualities that vary with body size. These functional concepts can be
337 applied to different communities and ecosystems, from terrestrial and soil to marine and
338 freshwater systems, and are, at least *a priori*, not biased towards vertebrates or
339 invertebrates.

340 The first concept, which combines a body-size based megafauna definition with
341 the keystone species concept [66], assumes that the largest species in an ecosystem
342 generally have disproportionately large effects in the structure and functioning of their
343 communities and ecosystems, both in magnitude and in the spatial and temporal
344 heterogeneity they create [67]. In line with this concept, a disproportionate increase in
345 energy use (e.g. represented by population biomass) in relation to body mass increases

346 has been identified in many vertebrate [24,63] and invertebrate phylogenetic groups
347 [64]. Accordingly, “keystone megafauna” would be *the subset of animals among the*
348 *largest in size that have consistently strong effects on the structure or functioning of a*
349 *community or an ecosystem*. Smaller animals would exhibit high variation in relation to
350 the effects that they exert on their ecosystems, from very weak to very strong (Fig. 4a).
351 All species that have a strong influence on their ecosystems, in general stronger than
352 expected by their abundance or biomass, may be regarded as keystone species
353 [61,66,68-70], but only those with relatively large body size should be termed as
354 keystone megafauna (Fig. 4b). In practice, this concept of megafauna may require
355 extensive ecological knowledge of the biotic communities and their functioning [68],
356 which would encourage a research agenda to better understand the ecological roles of
357 large species [61,68]. However, the use of proxies for ecological effects, such as size-
358 density relationships [63], could greatly simplify the identification of keystone
359 megafauna within different clades or guilds, including extinct fauna. Comparing the
360 magnitude, variability and skewness, as well as related breakpoints, of these
361 relationships (see Fig. 4a for a general formulation) among different animal groups
362 seems an exciting avenue for future megafauna research.

363 The second functional concept for megafauna is referred to as “functional
364 megafauna”, which can be defined as *the subset of largest species of a given clade or*
365 *guild that have distinctive functional traits (sensu [71])*. An important practical
366 advantage of this concept is that the identification of megafauna could be relatively
367 easily accomplished because it only needs a basic ecological knowledge. Ideally, studies
368 should focus on traits with high inter-specific variation, that may be easily measurable
369 and, therefore, comparable among the members of a given animal group. For instance,
370 within terrestrial mammals, megaherbivores differ from smaller herbivores in almost all

371 ecological and life history aspects (e.g. age at first conception, birth interval and
372 gestation time [24]). Also in terrestrial mammals, there is a functional transition
373 associated with a number of life history traits between carnivores exceeding an average
374 mass of 13-16 kg and those carnivores of smaller size [72]. In other, less studied cases,
375 the key question is, of course, to define the subset of functional traits to be explored.

376 A feasible variant of the functional megafauna concept would be “apex
377 megafauna”: *animals so large that they have escaped most non-anthropogenic*
378 *predation as adults*. This concept is related to the megaherbivore and apex predator
379 concepts [24,25,72] and can be applied to humans too. In Africa, herbivores larger than
380 150 kg are subject to reduced predation rates than smaller mammalian prey in some
381 areas [73], but only for herbivores exceeding 1000 kg predation is a consistently
382 negligible cause of adult mortality [24,73,74]. Within the order Carnivora, an average
383 mass of c. 15 kg corresponds to the transition between extrinsic- and self-regulation
384 [72].

385

386 **5. Conclusions**

387 Our comprehensive literature review and survey of researchers point to a dichotomy
388 between the need to establish operational body-size thresholds and a more functional
389 definition of megafauna. This confirms that the concept of megafauna is far from
390 simple, and, probably, it should not be simplified either. However, we highlight that
391 assessing megafauna from a functional perspective could challenge the perception that
392 there may not be a unifying definition of megafauna that can be applied to all eco-
393 evolutionary contexts and scientific approaches. The functional framework we present,
394 which arises from the perception of megafauna researchers that body size is insufficient
395 to capture the varied eco-evolutionary ramifications of megafauna, could help to reach

396 ecological generality and to minimize the arbitrariness of operational and other non-
397 functional definitions, which present ambiguity problems even at the within-discipline
398 level. This requires exploring thresholds in ecological functions and functional traits of
399 animals pertaining to different clades, guilds, communities and ecosystems. Addressing
400 this challenge could help to broaden out megafauna research, and provides an
401 opportunity to increase our biological understanding of megafauna too. Interestingly,
402 important advances have already been made in terrestrial mammalian systems, so that
403 herbivores exceeding 1000 kg and carnivores above an average body mass of c. 15 kg
404 could be considered as paradigmatic examples of both functional and apex megafauna.
405 Until studies exploring other animal groups and ecosystems are available, we encourage
406 scientists to define megafauna unambiguously and clearly present the distinct logic
407 behind their definition in every megafaunal study. Only by being explicit and
408 appropriately contextualizing the concept will we be able to reach the needed
409 conceptual disambiguation.

410 We found that cross-disciplinary investigations of megafauna are virtually non-
411 existent (but see e.g. [59]), which may be due, in part, to the fact that most megafauna
412 definitions in the scientific literature are strongly context-dependent. The existence of
413 recurrent topics among megafauna researchers concerned with different animal taxa and
414 ecosystems, such as the conservation of threatened megafauna, compels the search for
415 unifying tools. Using functional, rather than arbitrary, operational definitions, would
416 facilitate understanding and cooperation among wildlife, evolutionary and conservation
417 biologists, marine and soil ecologists, limnologists and paleontologists, and eventually
418 promote cutting-edge research across systems, disciplines, and geographic boundaries
419 [75,76].

420

421 **Data accessibility.** Data and code to replicate analyses are available on Dryad Digital Repository:
422 <https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.dv41ns1v3>.

423 **Authors' contributions.** M.M., J.A.S.Z., J.A.D., E.R. and K.T. conceived and designed the study;
424 M.M. made the literature review and collected data; M.M. and Z.M.R. created the databases; M.M.,
425 C.G.C. and B.M.L. conducted the semantic and statistical analyses, with critical inputs from all co-
426 authors; M.M. drafted the manuscript; all authors participated in discussions, contributed critically to data
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449

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641 Figure legends:

642

643 **Figure 1.** A representation of several examples of megafauna according to explicit-size-based-threshold
644 definitions that are commonly found in the scientific literature (see [Table S1](#)). Mass-based definitions
645 are typically used in vertebrate studies in terrestrial, pelagic marine and freshwater ecosystems, while
646 length-based definitions are typically used in invertebrate studies in benthic marine and soil ecosystems.
647 A list of the species represented and photograph credits is provided in [Appendix S2](#).

648

649 **Figure 2.** Number of megafauna publications according to ecosystem (terrestrial, marine, and
650 freshwater) and period (historical and prehistorical). For each pathway, we indicate in parentheses the
651 number and percentage of the total reviewed articles (n=276) that provide a definition of megafauna
652 and those that do not provide any definition; in the former case, we indicate if the definition is
653 supported by citations, arguments, both or none. Line width is proportional to the number of studies.
654 When an article referred to more than one ecosystem and/or period – 6% of cases – we depicted as
655 many lines as needed. Note that some “terrestrial” studies do not explain in detail the species
656 considered and may include also freshwater-dwelling species. Only articles with the term “megafauna”
657 in the title were considered for this purpose.

658

659 **Figure 3.** Relationship between species body mass and the proportion of respondents to the
660 questionnaire that classified the showed species as megafauna, either for the whole set of species (a) or
661 broken down by taxonomic group (b). Solid lines represent the fitted values of the model including only
662 body mass as predictor (for panel a: $F_{1,118}=510.3$, $P<0.001$; $R^2=0.81$). According to a regression tree
663 analysis (see [Appendix S4](#)), the species included in the questionnaires with body mass ≥ 61 kg (vertical
664 dotted line) had the highest probability of being classified as megafauna (probability ≥ 0.69 ; horizontal
665 dotted line).

666

667 **Figure 4.** A general, conceptual definition of megafauna based on body size and its coupling to the effect
668 of the species population on ecosystems. (a) The largest animals exert strong, consistently high impacts
669 on local ecosystems. In contrast, the effect of small animals on local ecosystems is highly variable, with

670 different species having low or high effects. The empirical challenge is to identify the shape of the size-
671 effect relationship. (b) Qualitative distribution of animal species in the two-dimensional space defined
672 by body size and ecosystem effects. Animals exerting high effects are defined as keystone species
673 [61,68-70], but only the largest keystone species are considered as megafauna. Note that large animals
674 exerting low/medium effects are rare.

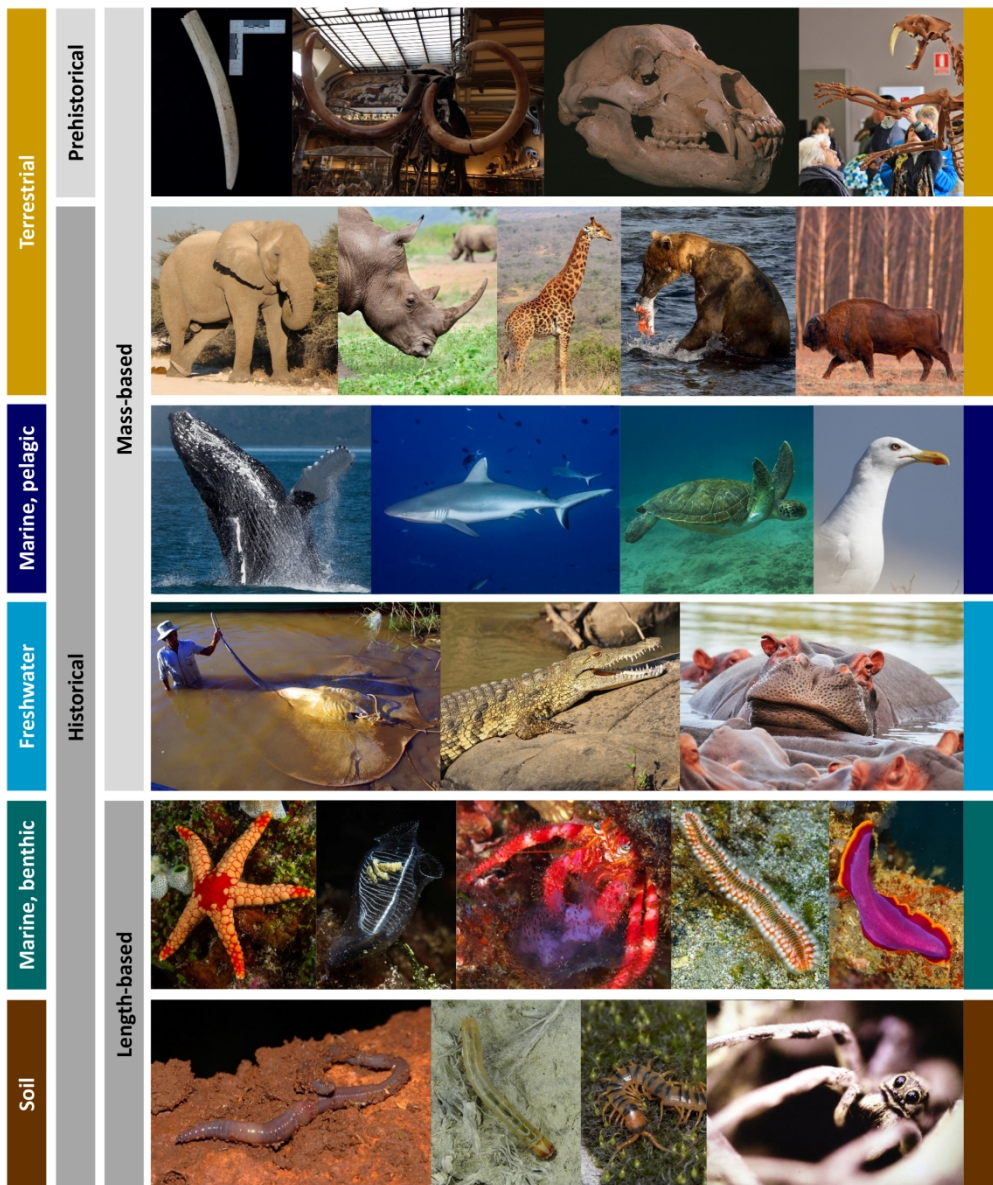


Figure 1

218x258mm (300 x 300 DPI)

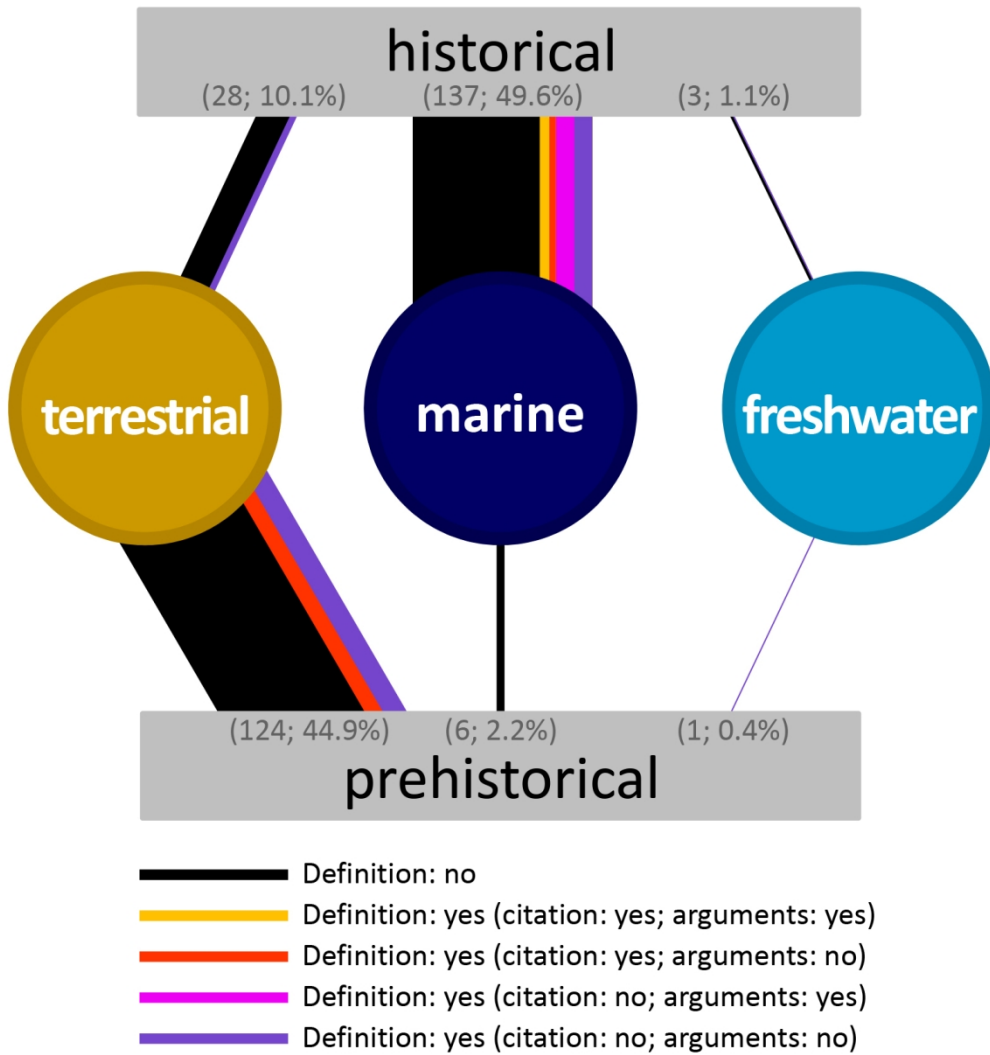


Figure 2

134x141mm (300 x 300 DPI)

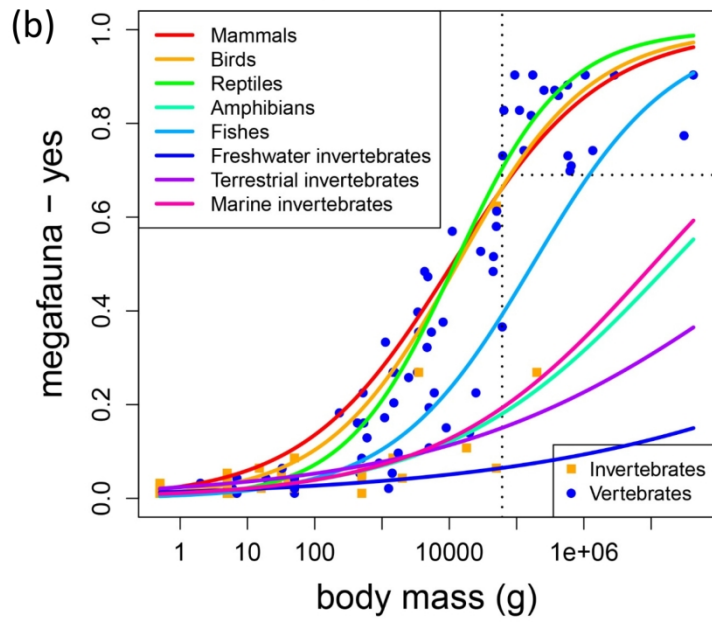
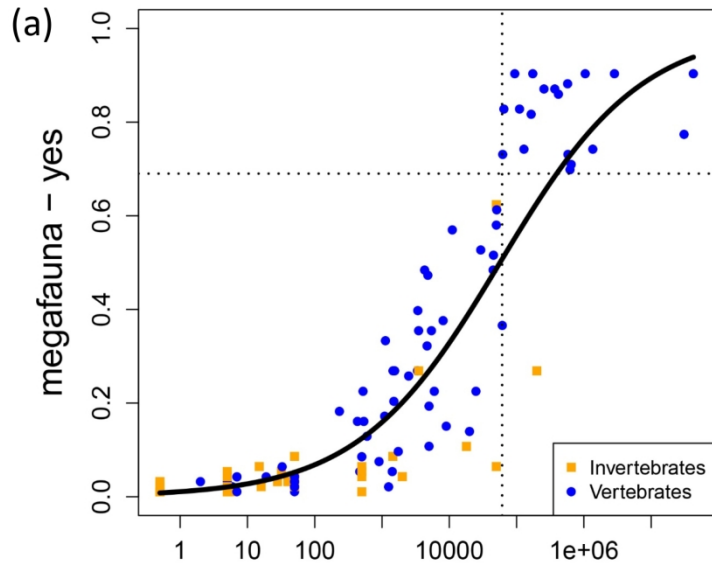


Figure 3

151x253mm (300 x 300 DPI)

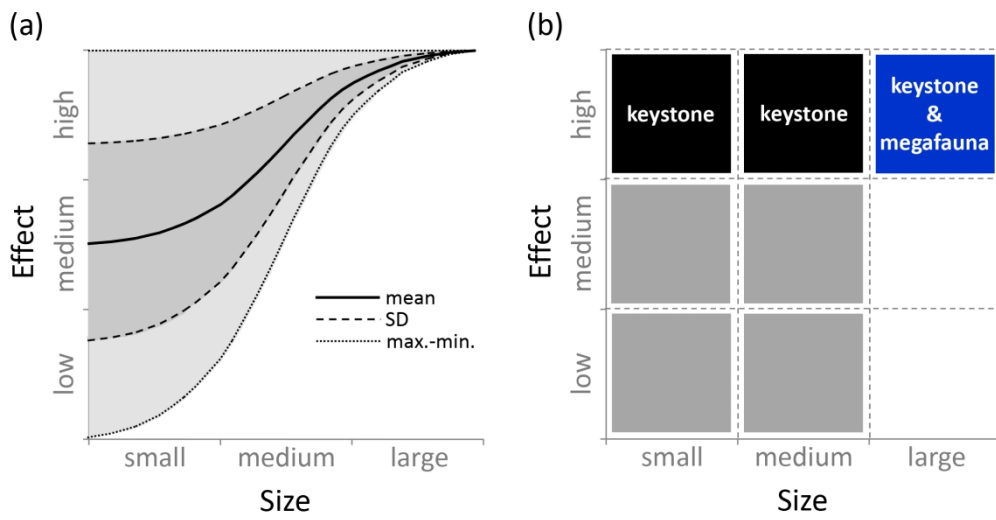


Figure 4

193x99mm (300 x 300 DPI)