<ONLINE ONLY SUMMARY>

Traces of a flawed colonial-era narrative about early settlers destroying 90% of Madagascar’s ‘original’ island-wide forests persist in recent scientific debates, despite evidence of great regional diversity - from humid, deciduous and spiny forests to woodlands, heaths and grassy biomes - and regionally distinct changes through time, deep into the past, Understanding these patterns and the historic interplay of natural and human drivers of environmental change are key to effective management strategies today, in addition to being of major scientific interest. Escape from narrative traps is difficult, but contemporary deforestation and the broader environmental crisis facing Madagascar make a complete liberation from the colonial-era story more urgent than ever. We highlight evidence of landscape dynamism and the spatiotemporal complexity of human settlement and impact; we identify knowledge gaps that must be filled to resolve contested interpretations of data; and we emphasize the need for more closely integrated inter-disciplinary research, and its central importance for present and future landscape policy and management.