



## SHORT COMMUNICATION

### THE AQUATIC SLOTH *THALASSOCNUS* (MAMMALIA, XENARTHRA) FROM THE LATE MIOCENE OF NORTH-CENTRAL CHILE: BIOGEOGRAPHIC AND ECOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

JHOANN CANTO,<sup>1</sup> RODOLFO SALAS-GISMONDI,<sup>\*2</sup> MARIO COZZUOL,<sup>3</sup> and JOSÉ YÁÑEZ<sup>4</sup>; <sup>1</sup>Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Sección Paleontología, Casilla 587, Santiago, Chile, jcanto@paleontologica.org; <sup>2</sup>Departamento de Paleontología de Vertebrados, Museo de Historia Natural, UNMSM, Av. Arenales 1256, Lima 14, Perú, rodsalasgis@yahoo.com; <sup>3</sup>Laboratorio de Paleontología, Museu de Ciência e Tecnologia—PUCRS, Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil, mario.cozzuol@pucrs.br; <sup>4</sup>Zoología Sección, Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Casilla 787, Santiago, Chile, jyanez@mnhn.cl

Sloths are one of the most conspicuous groups of the mammalian fauna of South America. They were widely distributed and extremely diversified in terrestrial environments from the Oligocene to the Pleistocene (Hoffstetter, 1982). Modern sloths are restricted to an arboreal life style in neotropical forest (Mendel, 1981), but many different habits have been inferred for fossil ground sloths. These include arboreality (Pujos et al., 2007), fossoriality (Bargo et al., 2000), and scavenging (Fariña and Blanco, 1996). In addition to these terrestrial habits, an aquatic ecology has been suggested for the nothrotheriid *Thalassocnus* of the late Miocene-Pliocene Pisco Formation in the Sacaco area, Peru (Muizon and McDonald, 1995). *Thalassocnus* remains are found associated with whales, dolphins, seabirds, crocodiles, bony fishes, sharks and rays in sediments corresponding to a nearshore marine environment. (Muizon and DeVries, 1985). Five species of *Thalassocnus* are currently recognized (McDonald and Muizon, 2002; Muizon et al., 2003, 2004a). These include *T. antiquus* (late Miocene), *T. natans* (latest Miocene), *T. littoralis* (early Pliocene), *T. carolomartini* (early late Pliocene), and *T. yaucensis* (late Pliocene). Morphological analysis provides evidence of feeding and locomotor adaptations of the *Thalassocnus* 'lineage' to an aquatic environment (e.g., Muizon et al., 2003, 2004b).

In north-central Chile, the late Miocene marine deposits of the Bahía Inglesa Formation resemble the vertebrate faunal composition, to Pisco Formation (Walsh and Naish, 2002). In 2002, a partial mandible of *Thalassocnus* (SGO.PV 1093) was found in the Bahía Inglesa Formation from the Caldera area (Canto, Yáñez, and Cozzuol, 2002). This record is more than 1600 km south of Sacaco area. It represents the first non-Pisco Formation remains of *Thalassocnus* and provides evidence of a wider and more complex offsetting for the evolution of the genus. Biogeographical and ecological interpretations based on the new data are discussed below, and the discovery of *Thalassocnus* and associated fauna allow us to provide new supporting data for the late Miocene age of the Bahía Inglesa Formation.

The Chilean specimen of *Thalassocnus* sp. (SGO.PV 1093) is housed in the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Santiago, Chile. This specimen was compared with *Thalassocnus antiquus* (MUSM 228, holotype), *T. natans* (MNHN SAS 734, holotype; MUSM 433), *T. littoralis* (MUSM 1033; MUSM 223, formerly referred to *T. natans* in Salas et al., 2005), *T. carolomartini* (MNHN SAO 203), and *T. yaucensis* (MUSM 37, holotype;

MUSM 1034). Measurements of SGO-PV 1093 were made to a tenth of millimeter using analog calipers.

**Institutional Abbreviations**—**MNHN SAO**, Sacaco collection of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris, France; **MNHN SAS**, Sacaco Sur collection of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris, France; **MUSM**, Departamento de Paleontología de Vertebrados, Museo de Historia Natural de la Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Lima, Perú; **SGO.PV**, Colección de Paleontología de Vertebrados del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Santiago, Chile.

#### GEOGRAPHIC SETTING, GEOLOGY, AND AGE

The Bahía Inglesa Formation, in the arid Caldera region, was described by Rojo (1985) and corresponds to a marine transgression on the northern-central coast of Chile (Fig. 1A) during the middle Miocene-early Pliocene (Marquardt et al., 2000). The type section is exposed in the inland of the Bahía Inglesa area and several outcrops dot the surrounding ravines that reach the sea (Fig. 1B). These fossiliferous deposits consist of 42 m of siltstones, fine sands, shelly coquinas, pebble beds, and a phosphatite (Walsh and Hume, 2001). Three stratigraphic sequences can be recognized of which the second is the well-known phosphatite bonebed (Unit 2, of Walsh and Hume, 2001) that bears a broad variety of marine fossil vertebrates (Walsh, 2002). The uppermost sequence is the sand and siltstone Lechero Member (Unit 3 of Walsh and Hume, 2001). SGO.PV 1093 was found in a small section of the Lechero Member located on private property 6 km northeast of the city of Caldera (Fig. 1B). The locality, known as 'Estanques de Copec' (EDC), includes at least one hectare of well exposed outcrops of this member with beds containing shark teeth and cetacean remains.

Different lines of evidence imply either an early Pliocene or late Miocene age for the Lechero Member. Planktonic foraminifera found in this sequence indicate an age of 4.5–2.6 Ma and 4.8 Ma (Ibaraki, 1995; Marchant et al., 2000) whereas the malaco-fauna generally suggests a late Miocene age (Guzman et al., 2000; DeVries, pers. comm., 2007). Based on the presence of the shark *Carcharodon carcharias*, but never *Cosmopolitodus* (= *Isurus*) *hastalis*, the Lechero Member had been constrained to the Pliocene (Long, 1993; Walsh and Hume, 2001; Walsh and Naish, 2002). However, during field work in EDC, one of us (JC) collected some shark teeth belonging to *C. (=I.) hastalis*, which had been shown to be an indication of Miocene horizons in the Pisco Formation (Muizon and DeVries, 1985). Additionally, anatomical characters of the *Thalassocnus* species from Chile

\*Corresponding author.

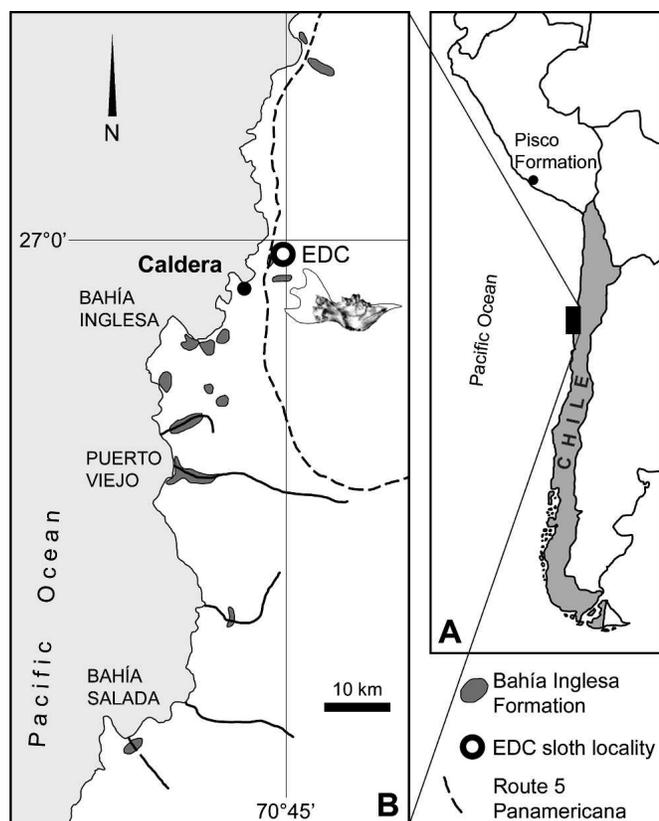


FIGURE 1. **A**, location of the study area in north-central Chile; and **B**, geographic map of the Caldera area showing the outcrops of the Bahía Inglesa Formation and the EDC (Estanques de Copec) sloth locality.

(SGO.PV 1093) fit with the morphology of either *T. antiquus* or *T. natans* (see below), two species known from the late Miocene and latest Miocene, respectively in the Pisco Formation (McDonald and Muizon, 2002; Muizon et al., 2003). Radiometric dates from an ash layer within the Lechero Member provides an  $^{40}\text{K}/^{39}\text{Ar}$  age of  $7.6 \pm 1.3$  Ma (late Miocene) (Marquardt et al., 2000) that is consistent with the new shark teeth data and evolutionary stage of the sloth taxon.

#### SYSTEMATIC PALEONTOLOGY

Order XENARTHRA Cope, 1889  
 Suborder PHYLLOPHAGA Owen, 1842  
 Superfamily MEGALONYCHOIDEA Simpson, 1931  
 Family NOTHROTHERIIDAE Ameghino, 1920  
 Subfamily THALASSOCNINAE Muizon et al., 2004a  
*THALASSOCNUS* Muizon and McDonald, 1995  
*THALASSOCNUS* sp.  
 (Figs. 2, 4; Table)

**Referred Specimen**—SGO.PV 1093, partial right mandible with m1–m3 (Fig. 2) from ‘Estanques de Copec’ locality (EDC), coastal area next to N° 5 national route, 6 km northeast to Caldera city, III Region (27°02’S –70°48’W), Chile. The Lechero Member of the Bahía Inglesa Formation, late Miocene to latest Miocene.

**Comparative Description**—SGO.PV 1093 consists of a right mandibular portion, from the posterior symphysis to the base of the coronoid process. The complete molariform series (m1–m3) is preserved with the occlusal surface of m1 and m3 damaged.

TABLE. Measurements (mm) of the partial mandible of *Thalassocnus* sp. (SGO.PV 1093) from Bahía Inglesa Formation, north-central Chile.

	<i>Thalassocnus</i> sp. SGO.PV 1093
m1 AP length	14.0
m1 MD width	13.1
m2 AP length	11.6
m2 MD width	14.7
m3 AP length	12.6
m3 MD width	13.2
Alveolar length of cheek teeth	43.3
Maximum depth of the horizontal ramus	46.6e
Angle of ventral edge of spout relative to cheek tooth row	~45°

**Abbreviations:** AP, anteroposterior; e, estimate; m, lower molariform; MD, mesiodistal.

The size of the Chilean material is comparable to the size of *Thalassocnus antiquus* and *T. natans*.

The horizontal ramus is robust and particularly deep below the molariforms. In contrast, it presents an oblique ventral edge anterior to m1 (~45° to horizontal plane) and a pronounced dorsoventral constriction posterior to m3, therefore a marked concavoconvex ventral profile of the horizontal ramus as in *T. antiquus* and *T. natans* (Fig. 3; Muizon et al., 2003). In SGO.PV 1093 the ratio of length of tooth row to maximum depth of the horizontal ramus is ~0.93. In *T. antiquus* (MUSM 228) this ratio is 0.96, whereas in *T. natans* (MUSM 433; MNHN SAS 734) it ranges from 0.95 to 0.99. In *T. carolomartini* (MNHN SAO 203) and *T. yaucensis* (MUSM 37) it is 1.13 and 1.14, respectively (Fig. 3).

The molariforms are square to rectangular in cross section. The median molariform (m2) is clearly rectangular and wider than longer (Fig. 2; Table). Both anterior and posterior transverse crests (i.e., lophids) are high and almost straight. The lophids are separated by a transverse valley. These features are observed in *T. antiquus*, *T. natans*, and in lesser degree in *T. littoralis* (Muizon et al., 2004b).

The base of the coronoid process preserves the posteroexternal foramen of the mandibular canal. The foramen faces dorso-laterally as is observed in *T. antiquus* and *T. natans* (Muizon et al., 2003) while in *T. carolomartini* and *T. yaucensis* it faces anterodorsally (Muizon et al., 2004a).

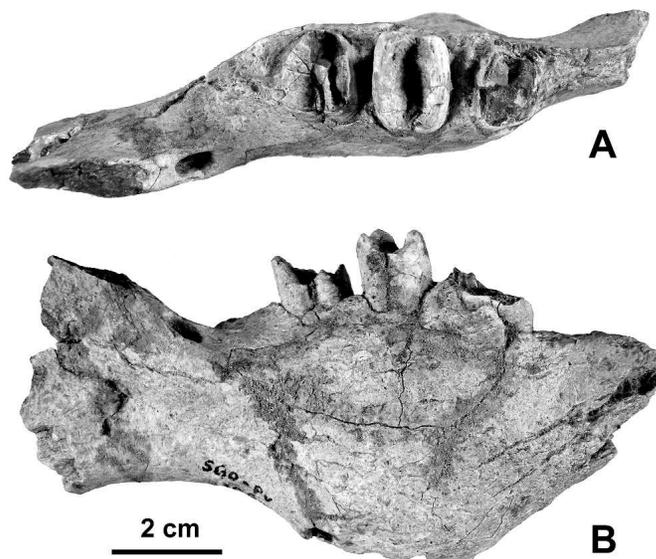


FIGURE 2. Partial right mandible of *Thalassocnus* sp. (SGO.PV 1093). **A**, occlusal view; and **B**, lateral view.

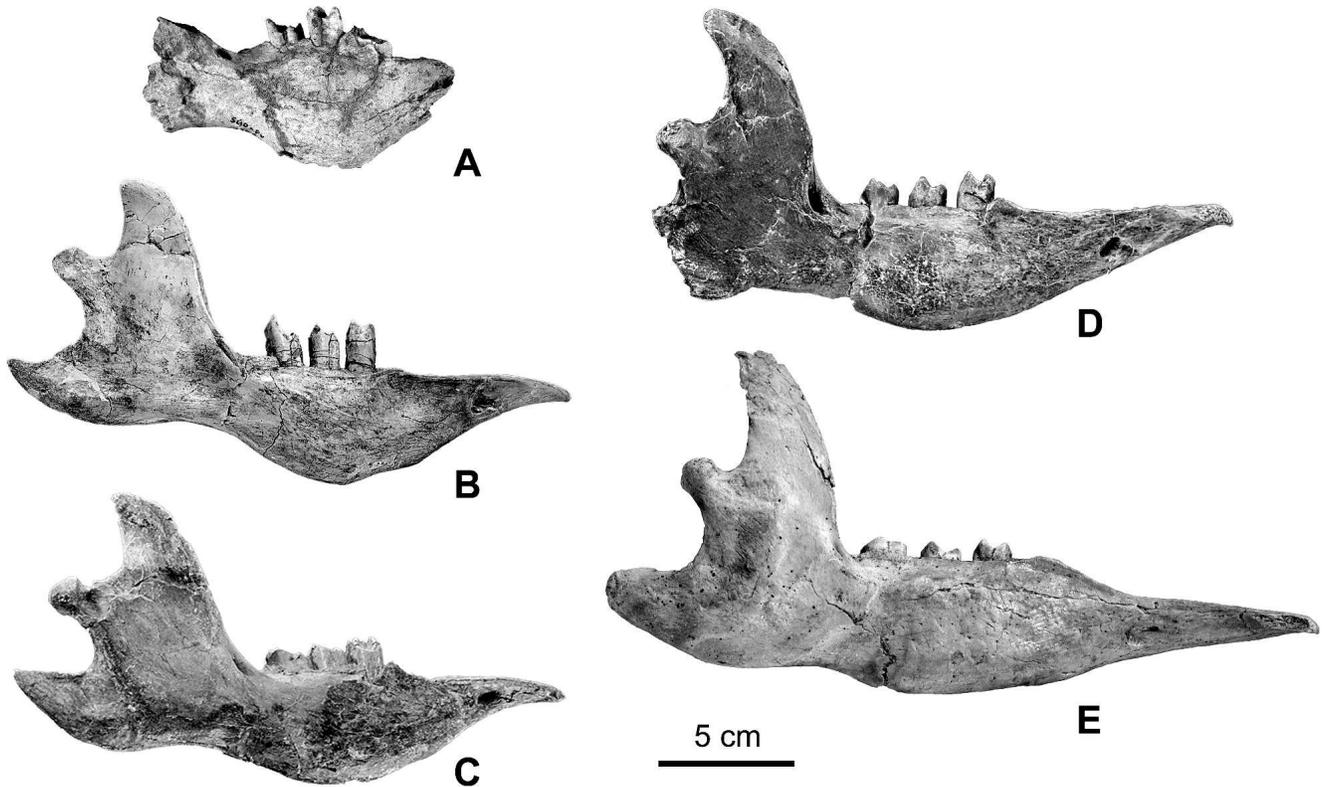


FIGURE 3. Comparative right lateral views of the mandible in *Thalassocnus* sp. from Bahía Inglesa Formation and species of *Thalassocnus* from Pisco Formation. **A**, *Thalassocnus* sp. (SGO.PV 1093); **B**, *T. antiquus* (holotype, MUSM 228); **C**, *T. natans* (holotype, MNHN SAS 734); **D**, *T. carolomartini* (MNHN SAO 203); and **E**, *T. yaucensis* (holotype, MUSM 37).

## DISCUSSION

The fossil record of *Thalassocnus* provides unique evidence for the evolution and functional anatomy of a sloth lineage. The five species, recognized from well preserved skulls, mandibles, and postcranial elements from the Pisco Formation of the Sacaco area, had been considered endemic to the southern coast of Peru (e.g., Muizon et al., 2003) and as ranging from late Miocene to late Pliocene age (Muizon et al., 2004a).

The specimen from Bahía Inglesa increases the geographic distribution of *Thalassocnus* by more than 1600 km to the south of previous records. It may still be considered an endemic taxon, but on a more regional scale. Geologic and paleontologic evidence from Sacaco and Caldera indicate climatic and faunistic resemblance during the Miocene-Pliocene span. The forearc sedimentary succession is consistent with an arid to semiarid climate in southern Peru and northern Chile since the middle Miocene (Alpers and Brimhall, 1988) or considerably earlier (Hartley et al., 2005). Climate controls on the Peru-Chile desert (e.g., ancestral Humboldt Current) directly influenced coastal life in the whole area. During the late Miocene-Pliocene, the intertidal and subtidal molluscan fauna from southern Peru and northern Chile is mostly endemic and has a large proportion of species in common (DeVries and Frassinetti, 2003; DeVries, pers. comm., 2007). Among vertebrates, most of the genera of phocids (*Acrophoca*, *Piscophoca*), odontocetes (*Pliopontos*, *Brachydelphis*), marine birds (*Spheniscus*, *Phalacrocorax*, *Sula*), and now *Thalassocnus*, originally recorded in the Pisco deposits (e.g., Muizon, 1981, 1988; Cheneval, 1993; Muizon and McDonald, 1995; Canto, Crovetto, and Covacevich, 2002) have been identified in the Bahía Inglesa Formation (e.g., Walsh and Hume, 2001; Walsh and Naish, 2002). All this evidence suggests

that during the late Miocene-Pliocene in the southern Peru-northern Chile region, there existed a vast coastal area of stable ecological conditions, biogeographic continuity, and closely related evolutionary history.

Advanced anatomical features in *Thalassocnus* have been associated with an aquatic life style (e.g., Muizon et al., 2004b), though this ecological assumption is based mainly on the taphonomy of several articulated specimens found in the Pisco Formation (e.g., Muizon and McDonald, 1995). Sedimentologic data reveals that the Bahía Inglesa Formation corresponds to a shallow marine setting deposited within 10 km of the shore (Marquardt et al., 2000; Walsh 2002). The vertebrate assemblage including whales, dolphins, seals, crocodiles, seabirds, bony fish, sharks, and rays is present in both Pisco and Bahía Inglesa Formations. Taxa traditionally considered terrestrial (other than *Thalassocnus*) are very rare and fragmentary in the former (e.g., Muizon and DeVries, 1985; Salas et al., 2002) and completely absent in the latter formation (Walsh, 2002). Anatomical attributes related to the life style of the Chilean species of *Thalassocnus* cannot be inferred due to the scarcity of available material. However, the occurrence of this sloth in the Bahía Inglesa Formation is further taphonomic evidence of the aquatic affinities proposed for the *Thalassocnus* lineage.

The preserved mandible of *Thalassocnus* from Chile (SGO.PV 1093) is clearly more similar to *T. antiquus* and *T. natans* than any other later species of the genus. They share a marked concavoconvex ventral profile of the horizontal ramus, posteroexternal foramen of the mandibular canal facing dorsolaterally, and m2 rectangular and wider than long. Muizon et al. (2004b) show that the general cross section shape of the median molars (M2, M3, and m2) is useful in the recognition of *Thalassocnus* species. A scatter plot for m2 illustrates the position of SGO.PV

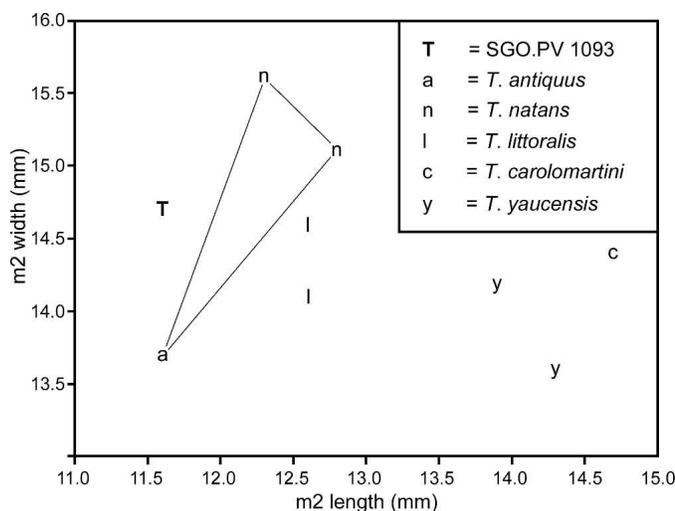


FIGURE 4. Length vs. width scatter plot of lower molar 2 (m2) samples of species of *Thalassocnus* relative to *Thalassocnus* sp. (SGO.PV 1093) from Bahía Inglesa Formation.

1093 relative to the species of *Thalassocnus* described from the Pisco Formation (Fig. 4). It is clearly observed that, from earlier to later species, the width/length ratio of m2 decreases to more equivalent dimensions. SGO.PV 1093 is located closer to the morphospace of *T. antiquus*-*T. natans* than to any other more derived species.

The phylogenetic analysis within the *Thalassocninae* presents two equally parsimonious hypotheses: one favors the existence of a single time-successive lineage, while the other excludes *T. natans* from the lineage due to the presence of some plesiomorphic characters relative to the earlier *T. antiquus* (Muizon et al, 2003) and implies an adaptive radiation of the *Thalassocninae*. Considering the small area of distribution known for *Thalassocnus* and the limited biological resources available along the arid coast of Peru during Late Miocene-Pliocene, Muizon et al. (2003) favored a single time-successive lineage. The Chilean material is insufficient to resolve the phylogeny, but indirectly supports the alternative hypothesis by offering a bigger geographic area with numerous opportunities for the adaptive radiation of the *Thalassocninae*.

**Acknowledgments**—We are indebted to D. Frassinetti, T. J. DeVries, A. Dooley, and B. J. Shockey for helpful discussion and invaluable comments. We also express our gratitude to S. Hillbrandt for the technical preparation of SGO.PV 1093, as well as D. Omura, J. Tejada, M. Urbina, and W. Aguirre for their assistance. Thanks are due to C. De Muizon, an anonymous reviewer, and P. Holroyd for helpful reviews of this manuscript.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Alpers, C., and G. Brimhall. 1988. Middle Miocene climatic change in the Atacama desert, northern Chile: evidence from supergene mineralization at La Escondida. *Bulletin of the Geological Society of America* 100:1640–1656.
- Ameghino, F. 1920. Sur les édentés fossiles de l'Argentine. Examen critique, révision et correction de l'ouvrage de la M. R. Lydekker. *Obras Completas y Correspondencia Científica* 11:447–909.
- Bargo, S., S. Vizcaíno, F. Archuby, and E. Blanco. 2000. Limb bone proportions, strength and digging in some Lujanian (Late Pleistocene-Early Holocene) mylodontid ground sloths (Mammalia, Xenarthra). *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* 20:601–610.
- Canto, J., A. Crovetto, A., and V. Covacevich. 2002. Hallazgo de *Pliopontos* sp. (Cetacea: Pontoporidae) en el Neógeno de Chile. *Noticiario Mensual del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural* 350:28–37.

- Canto, J., J. Yáñez, and M. A. Cozzuol. 2002. Mamíferos marinos neógenos de la Formación Bahía Inglesa, Caldera, III Región, Chile. *Primer Congreso Latinoamericano de Paleontología de Vertebrados*, Santiago, Chile:22.
- Cheneval, J. 1993. L'Avifaune Mio-Pliocène de la Formation Pisco (Pérou) Étude préliminaire. *Documents des Laboratoires de Géologie Lyon* 125:85–95.
- Cope, E. D. 1889. The Edentata of North America. *American Naturalist* 23:657–664.
- DeVries, T. J., and D. Frassinetti. 2003. Range extensions and biogeographic implications of the Chilean neogene mollusks found in Peru. *Boletín del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Chile* 52:119–135.
- Fariña, R. A., and Blanco R. E. 1996. *Megatherium*, the stabber. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B* 263:1725–1729.
- Guzmán, N., C. Marquardt, L. Ortlieb, and D. Frassinetti. 2000. La malacofauna neogena y cuaternaria del área de Caldera (27°–28° S) especies y rangos bioestratigráficos. *Actas IX Congreso Geológico Chileno*, 1:476–481.
- Hartley A. J., G. Chong, J. Houston, and A. E. Mather. 2005. 150 million years of climatic stability: evidence from the Atacama Desert, northern Chile. *Journal of the Geological Society, London* 162:421–424.
- Hoffstetter, R. 1982. Les Edentes Xenarthres, un groupe singulier de la faune neotropicale (origine affinités, adaptative, migrations et extinctions). *Proceedings of the First International Meeting on "Paleontology, Essential of Historical Geology"* 1:385–443.
- Ibaraki, M. 1995. Neogene chronostratigraphy of biosiliceous sediments on the Pacific coast of South America based on planktonic foraminifera. *Reports of the Faculty of Science, Shizuoka University* 29: 63–71.
- Long, D. 1993. Late Miocene and Early Pliocene fish assemblages from the north central coast of Chile. *Tertiary Research* 14:117–126.
- Marchant, M., C. Marquardt, N. Blanco, and E. Godoy. 2000. Foraminíferos del área de Caldera (26°45'–28° S) y su utilización como indicadores cronoestratigráficos del Neógeno. *Actas IX Congreso Geológico Chileno* 1:499–503.
- Marquardt, C., N. Blanco, A. Lavenu, L. Godoy, L. Ortlieb, M. Marchant, and N. Guzmán. 2000. Estratigrafía del Cenozoico superior en el Área de Caldera (26°45'–28°S), III Región de Atacama, Chile. *Actas IX Congreso Geológico Chileno* 1:504–508.
- McDonald, H. G., and C. de Muizon. 2002. The cranial anatomy of *Thalassocnus* (Xenarthra, Mammalia), a derived nothrother from the Neogene of Pisco Formation (Peru). *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* 22:349–365.
- Mendel, F. 1981. Use of hands and feet of two-toed sloth (*Choloepus hoffmani*) during climbing and terrestrial locomotion. *Journal of Mammalogy* 62:413–421.
- Muizon, C. de. 1981. Les Vertébrés fossiles de la Formation Pisco (Pérou). Première partie. Deux nouveaux Monachinae (Phocidae, Mammalia) du Pliocène de Sud-Sacaco. *Travaux de l'Institut Français d'Études Andines* 25:1–188.
- Muizon, C. de. 1988. Les Vertébrés fossiles de la Formation Pisco (Pérou). Troisième partie: Les Odontocètes (Cetacea, Mammalia) miocènes. *Travaux de l'Institut Français d'Études Andines* 42: 1–244.
- Muizon, C. de, and T. J. DeVries. 1985. Geology and paleontology of Late Cenozoic marine deposits in the Sacaco area (Peru). *Geologische Rundschau* 74:547–563.
- Muizon, C. de, and H. G. McDonald. 1995. An aquatic sloth from the Pliocene of Peru. *Nature* 375:224–227.
- Muizon, C. de, H. G. McDonald, R. Salas, and M. Urbina. 2003. A new early species of the aquatic sloth *Thalassocnus* (Mammalia, Xenarthra) from the late Miocene of Peru. *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* 23:886–894.
- Muizon, C. de, H. G. McDonald, R. Salas, and M. Urbina. 2004a. The youngest species of the sloth *Thalassocnus* and a reassessment of the relationships of the sloths (Mammalia: Xenarthra). *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* 24:387–397.
- Muizon, C. de, H. G. McDonald, R. Salas, and M. Urbina. 2004b. The evolution of feeding adaptations of the aquatic sloth *Thalassocnus*. *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* 24:398–410.
- Owen, R. 1842. Description of the skeleton of an extinct gigantic sloth, *Mylodon robustus*, Owen, with observations on the osteology, natural affinities, and probable habits of the megatherioid quadruped in general. R. and J. Taylor, London, 176 pp.
- Pujos, F., G. De Iuliis, C. Argot, and L. Werdelin. 2007. A peculiar

- climbing Megalonychidae from the Pleistocene of Peru and its implication for sloth history. *Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society* 149:179–235.
- Rojo, M. A. 1985. Un aporte al conocimiento del Terciario marino: Formación Bahía Inglesa. *Actas IV Congreso Geológico Chileno* 1:514–533.
- Salas, R., J. Sánchez, and C. Chacaltana. 2002. Primer registro de un ungulado nativo (Mammalia, Litopterna, Macraucheniiidae) en el Mioceno superior de la Formación Pisco. *XI Congreso Peruano de Geología (Resúmenes)*, Lima, Perú:217.
- Salas, R., F. Pujos, and C. de Muizon. 2005. Ossified meniscus and cyamo-fabella in some fossil sloths: a morpho-functional interpretation. *Geobios* 38:389–394.
- Simpson, G. G. 1931. A new classification of mammals. *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History* 59:259–293.
- Walsh, S. A. 2002. Taphonomy and genesis of the Neogene of Bahía Inglesa Formation bonebed, northern Chile. *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* 22(3, Supplement):117A.
- Walsh, S. A., and J. P. Hume. 2001. A new Neogene marine avian assemblage from North-Central Chile. *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* 21:484–491.
- Walsh, S. A., and Naish D. 2002. Fossil seals from late Neogene deposit in South America: a new pinniped (Carnivora, Mammalia) assemblage from Chile. *Palaeontology* 45:821–842.

Submitted March 27, 2007; accepted January 16, 2008.