

# AROUND THE WORLD IN SEVEN YEARS

Paul Salopek's expedition to trace human evolution with slow journalism

BY ALEXANDRA ROJEK



## Great Rift Valley, Tanzania:

Salopek began his expedition in this Great Rift Valley in Ethiopia in January 2013, where it is thought our ancestors originated from and began their migration out of Africa.

*Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

Sitting in the Barker Center at Harvard University one evening, it was clear that there was something unique about Paul Salopek – he paced the room instead of sitting and waiting to speak, almost as if it was an unnatural habitat for him. There was also a look on his face that in retrospect must have been a reflection of the journey that he was about to embark on: his Walk out of Eden project. He had just returned from Tierra del Fuego, where he will end his journey in the year 2020 after seven years of walking, chronicling the migration of humans and experiencing what it is like to see the world at our natural pace, three miles an hour.

Salopek's journey is equal parts an exploration of "slow journalism" and one of retracing the steps of human evolution. He began his walk in Ethiopia's Rift Valley and will travel into Arabia, cross the Middle East, trek

across Eurasia into East Asia, through China up to Siberia, finally walking down the two continents of the New World to end in Tierra del Fuego: the last place to be colonized by our ancestors (1).

The planned trip is expected to take seven years and carry Salopek through 36 countries. Salopek could make any number of insights about the evolutionary walk of our *Homo sapiens* ancestors or of the nature of human relations and how we are rapidly changing that landscape in the age of virtual communications. He is incredibly well qualified to carry out both goals: he was trained as an environmental biologist at the University of California Santa Barbara, but has had life experiences as varied as rancher, cowhand, and commercial fisherman. As a journalist, he was a foreign correspondent on conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Latin America. He is

a National Geographic Fellow and has won countless awards, topped with two Pulitzer Prizes, and is also connected to Harvard through a Nieman Fellowship (2).

As Salopek began his walk in January 2013 in the Rift Valley of Ethiopia, he mirrored the presumed footsteps of *Homo erectus*, the precursor to *H. sapiens*. *H. erectus* was the first known hominin to migrate out of Africa, as it primarily lived in Asia thereafter (major fossils were found in China and Indonesia). Unlike earlier hominins, it also did not use trees for safety or as a source of food: they walked and ran on two feet much like *H. sapiens* (3). They were also the longest-lived early human species, but it remains unclear whether they were the direct ancestors of *H. sapiens* (3). Regardless, their exit from Africa makes them one of the first ancestors of humans that Salopek is tracing.

While accomplishing this drawn-out



evolutionary trace of human migration, Salopek will also be radically expanding the field of slow journalism in an age where our communications are becoming anything but slow. Salopek is documenting his journey with milestones every 100 miles, consisting of a visual panorama - a photograph of the ground he is standing on and the sky he is looking up at - and three questions posed to the person nearest him: who are you, where do you come from, and where are you going (4).

In an age where global connectivity is increasing with internet access and mobile phone use is consistently rising, it may seem as if the way we communicate is changing. Movements such as Twitter reduce information to a set number of characters, focusing on quick and frequent updates to communicate. Instead, Salopek is relying on periodic updates that encompass

aggregate observations as he walks: his writing is intended to mirror the pace at which he travels at, a pace that is innately human.

As Salopek's first dispatches from the field trickle in, the picture that emerges is one of a starkly different view of the world than anything that could be gleaned from traditional field journalism that he has worked on extensively before. His dispatches have a unique tone, one that arises from the detail he affords to his writing and the innate similarities that define humanity and that he reveals as he walks at a pace defined by our nature. Thus far, he has discovered the power of bonding with camels - a strange relationship, bound together by their similar pace and journey, at least for the time being. He has also come in contact with unexpected borders and the alien feel they convey from a perspective like his (4).

With time, Salopek will undoubtedly develop common trends and stories from his experiences as he chronicles our move across the planet in an unprecedented way - one that not only makes him the first to see the world from such a perspective, but also has the potential to change the way that we view our world and the disparities between our natural history and our future.

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#### References

1. R. Banerji, in BBC News Magazine. (2013).
2. Sapolek, Paul. in Out of Eden Walk. (Knight Foundation, 2013).
3. S. C. Anton, Natural history of *Homo erectus*. Am J Phys Anthropol Suppl 37, 126 (2003).
4. P. Salopek. (National Geographic, 2013).



**Tierra del Fuego, Chile:** Salopek will end his trek here in 2020, the last place to be colonized by our ancestors *Homo sapiens*. **Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.**

