

Editor's note: In 2013, National Geographic Explorer and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Paul Salopek set out on foot from Ethiopia to follow the trails blazed by the first humans who migrated out of Africa some 60,000 to 120,000 years ago. His [Out of Eden Walk](https://outofedenwalk.nationalgeographic.org/) (<https://outofedenwalk.nationalgeographic.org/>) is a storytelling journey to “explore human conditions at boot level, across borders and cultures, and makes connections between ordinary peoples’ lives and the global headlines of our day,” according to the Out of Eden website. In March, Wrack Lines editor Judy Benson and her Connecticut Sea Grant colleague Margaret Cozens caught up with Salopek via Zoom to chat about his amazing journey. After he crosses Canada and the United States, his trek will continue through Central and South America to its final destination at Tierra del Fuego.



# 12 Questions with Paul Salopek



**Left:** National Geographic Explorer Paul Salopek walks near Birah Sharif, Bihar, India, in 2019. Photo: Paul Salopek / National Geographic.

**Top:** National Geographic Explorer Paul Salopek leads a pair of camels across Ethiopia's Afar desert, at the beginning of the Out of Eden walk in 2013. Photo: John Stanmeyer / National Geographic

**Bottom:** Salopek rows along a section of the Ganges River in Varanasi, India, Hinduism's holiest city. Photo: John Stanmeyer / National Geographic

### **1. Where are you now?**

“We’re paused in Gustavas, Alaska, near Glacier Bay for the spring.”

### **2. How are your feet?**

“No complaints in that department, thanks for asking.”

### **3. How did you decide the route? I know you wanted to follow the migration path of ancient humans, but I’m sure there were a lot of details and variations within that that you had to decide. Did you have certain criteria to follow, or certain locations you wanted the route to go through?**

“It’s based on evolution and the theories of paleo archeologists, and on the evidence of fossils and genetics of when early humans migrated out of Africa. We’re following broad strokes, not so much pathways. We’re taking a very pragmatic approach to deciding the route, and walking to certain archeological sites along the way. Some of it is spur of the moment, determined by visa issues, or politics or borders. It’s a lot less organized than it seems.”

### **4. Much like the way our ancient ancestors migrated?**

“Theirs even more so in terms of being spontaneous. The first wave of humans didn’t head out with a destination and hadn’t even yet invented the idea of destination. They were following resources like herds of antelope, or coastlines for access to food.”

### **5. Did you meet with other migrants along the way?**

“If you consult with the UN’s International Organization for Migration, you learn that this is

in many ways the golden age of migration, both for good and bad. Right now, about one seventh to one eighth of the world’s population—about 1 billion people— are not in their home countries, either because of climate change impacts, or politics or wars or for work. In China where you have hyper-urbanization, the rural areas are very sparsely populated. No one under 50 lives there. I walked through a refugee camp near the Syrian border, where some of the 13 million Syrians displaced by the war there are living. I am cognizant that I’m an extremely privileged migrant, a voluntary migrant. It’s a very big decision for people to leave their homes.”

### **6. Is there an interaction that stood out to you on your journey?**

“I don’t have a stock answer. This isn’t a solo journey. It’s about building community, about the people who walk with me. It’s more than the logistics and transportation. The people I walk with are co-equal storytellers. If they’re interested in the arts, we talk about arts, if they’re interested in conservation, we talk about that. I’ve had about 100 walking partners so far, and all of them are extraordinary people. There were some 20 people who walked with me in China, mostly women. They live in a system that is very constrained and is hierarchal, so the work of women is not rewarded as much as men. Yet they find a way to survive and still be creative to bring value to their lives. It was very inspirational.”

### **7. What does the entourage that’s traveling with you consist of, and how has it varied throughout the journey?**

“The entourage is just one other person. My walking partners come to the project in multiple ways. They’ve been following the project and contact us ahead of me coming into their country, and they connect me with friends and relatives ahead on the trail. Some of it is serendipity. In eastern Turkey I met a man in a teashop who was a landscape photographer and he ended up walking with me for seven months, into Georgia.

“I never walk alone. I walk with a local person, to see the world through their eyes. In China I walked with a poet and a historian. I walked with ethnic Tibetan mountaineers, with guides for cultural tourism companies. The people who walk with me share my journey, help with language, and they often have fun discovering their homeland on foot.”

### **8. The theme of this issue of Wrack Lines is focused on the relationship between place and community, how caring for places builds communities and visa-versa. What have you learned about place and community through your travels?**

“Moving around the world you need community. We’re a social species. No matter where you go you can build it. Community is that baseline. We all have that ability to create community by tapping into another person. I went through an area on the outer coast of Alaska with very few people, most of whom had come to escape hyper-urban areas, seeking solitude and quiet landscapes and to commune with nature. They are wonderful people but they also seemed very lonely. They were missing

something to push against. I'm not a nature writer. I'm not interested in a landscape unless there are people in it. Walking to people is the premise of my entire career."

**9. Is there a place you would go back to?**

"There are people I would go back to. I made deep connections with people in the Caucasus in Georgia, in western Saudi Arabia and in places in China and India. There are over 360,000 villages in India and every single one has a different temperature, a different attitude."

**10. How have you looked on the United States over the years of your travels through your various vantage points?**

"I'm not an insider, I'm an outsider. I was born in the U.S. but I left when I was 5 and was raised in Latin America. I was last in the United States in 2012, and when I reentered the U.S. for the first time in 12 years last year, it was surreal. Has it changed? Absolutely. When I enter the country next autumn, I hope to record it as honestly as I can. I hope to rediscover the U.S. It's chock-full of good people."

**11. When do you anticipate ending your journey?**

"Another two to three years."

**12. Is there anything you'd like to say to the readers of Wrack Lines?**

"There's nothing special about what I'm doing. It's getting up in the morning, putting on your shoes, brushing your teeth and going to work. It's always humbling to get to do this every day, to meet people and receive their stories."



**Top:** Salopek walks along the Wakhan Corridor in Badakhshan, Afghanistan, in 2017. Photo: Matthieu Paley / *National Geographic*

**Middle:** Salopek captured this photo of a sunset on the southwest area of The Silk Road in Heshun, Yunnan, China, in 2021. Photo: Paul Salopek / *National Geographic*

**Bottom:** Salopek, his walking partner Lee Junseok and guide Kim Gwi-nam stop near the first gate of Joryeong Path, Mungyeong Saejae Provincial Park, South Korea, in 2024. Photo: Jun Michael Park / *National Geographic*