



## *To The Ends Of The Earth... And Back*

**Parker Liautaud**

**California & Antarctica**

When he reached the North Pole, Climate change activist Parker Liautaud realized a daring, Arctic dream - at the age of 16. He isn't your ordinary Arctic explorer. Of course, there aren't any *ordinary* Arctic explorers. But Parker himself doesn't cut a particularly imposing figure, nor does he fit the archetype one might assume when trying to conjure up the image of a heroic, ice-stricken figure standing at the top of the world. On looks alone, Parker could even be considered unassuming. He's slight of build. Soft-spoken. He has said about himself, that he's "the least athletically impressive person ever to visit the poles," which gives you a glimpse into his quirky, light-hearted nature. Parker is humorous, humble, and whenever he addresses a crowd, which he often does, he's always measured in his speech and clear in his singular message: it's his generation's responsibility to take up the reins in the fight against climate change.

By the age of 17, Parker had already made three separate expeditions to the Arctic. His first visit was with the renowned Arctic explorer Robert Swan, who was the first person to walk both the North and South Poles. On this expedition, they stayed at a base ran entirely on renewable energy sources, which fascinated Parker. His initial foray to the Arctic was in a scientific capacity. Here, his interaction with green technology, coupled with seeing the dire situation for himself firsthand, lit a fire in Parker that compelled him to get involved in the fight against climate change in a much more permanent and impactful way.

Climate change is affecting the entire planet, but it affects certain areas like the Arctic disproportionately. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), "Antarctica has experienced air temperature increases of 3°C in the Antarctic Peninsula. Although that might not seem very much, it is 5 times the mean rate of global warming." Understanding the precariousness of the situation at hand, their expedition set various scientific goals for their visit. Parker himself was involved in gathering the rarest of rare commodities - Arctic snow samples. These would ultimately act as a Rosetta Stone of sorts for scientists the world over, when Parker successfully brought these samples back to the research station. This is because the Tritium in the snow samples acts as a relatively reliable oceanic tracer of sorts and can reveal hidden - and changing - patterns of ocean circulation and ventilation that can't be observed with the naked eye.

These might seem like larger than life responsibilities for someone so young to have to burden, and in a way they are. But that doesn't change the fact that in most every other way, Parker was just the same as any other ordinary teenager.

As an American student at Eton, an illustrious British boarding school for boys, Parker always "felt like an outsider", which he credits as a driving, if not painful force, in his development as a socially and environmentally conscious citizen. His inability to fit in was no secret at Eton. He stood out as an obvious foreigner, a culture-shocked teenager trying to adjust to a very different way of life. During this period, he laments his "bad social skills" as being the reason he made no friends, and subsequently spent a lot of time with his nose to the grindstone, intently focused on his studies.

When Parker returned to school in England, he committed himself to serving a greater purpose than his own. He would spend his days spreading the word about the desperate situation at the poles to anybody he could. It didn't take long for Parker to realize that not everybody shared his passion for protecting the earth. He wrote article after article on global warming, climate change, and stewardship of the polar regions, but got little reaction. No one seemed to care about a 15-year old's point of view on these harrowing topics, even with the factual evidence and scientific data at hand, backing his stance. So, what was it that was causing his message to fall on deaf ears? Did he lack credibility because of his youth? Was it political? Perhaps he needed to find someone more dynamic to help him spread the message?

It proved to be a very confusing and disheartening period for Parker, who had a quick, curious mind, and rarely struggled to achieve what he wanted to in an intellectual sense. He had a message, and it was an important message, but it wasn't getting through. Perhaps idealistically, he thought that the climate situation at the poles was so urgent, and indisputable from an evidentiary standpoint, that any rational person would share his passion equally. On a personal level, Parker was also struggling to fit in at school during this time, and it seemed to make his efforts, which weren't being received with any enthusiasm, feel all the more isolating and meaningless.

Over a century earlier, at the age of 22, Sir Ernest Shackleton had his *eureka* moment, saying, "I had a dream that someday I would go to the region of ice and snow, and go on and on until I came to one of the poles of the earth." At the age of 27 his dream was realized, when he joined Captain Robert Falcon Scott on the now renowned *Discovery* expedition to Antarctica.

Ernest Shackleton is noted to have famously said, in the most understated fashion, "Difficulties are just things to overcome." And it would take an individual with the cunning and resolve of Parker Liautaud, to come up with a new plan in the face of this adversity, to truly make an impact in the expansive world beyond the walls of Eton.

Whether it was on the news or at school, Parker always heard people talking about global warming, and how climate change will disproportionately affect the next generation. That's why something has to be done - and now. "We have to think about the children," he recalls hearing, and when he did, his natural curiosity took over. *If it's going to affect us, why are we waiting for someone else to address the problem?* Parker thought. And that's when Parker Liautaud, like his forbearer Sir Ernest Shackleton before him, had his *eureka* moment. He knew that the global situation was dire, and that time was running out. More importantly, he'd need to find a creative way to engage his peers, so as to involve his generation in the fight and get them invested in the larger cause. Besides, he didn't see anyone else doing anything but talk about the problem at hand.

After all, he'd had a rare experience that even the brightest Etonians hadn't - he'd seen the perilous Arctic firsthand. He braved the hostile territory. He had stayed at a base ran on renewables, living in the spirit of the cause he was trying to marshal. He had learned about the Arctic's fragile ecosystem, and its unique role in moderating global temperature. He personally had done research in service of the region's protection and felt a kinship to it - even an ownership of it, in a sense. So why not take it a step further? If he intended to ask as much of his peers, surely he should have the wherewithal to stand up and lead them. Calling on his past experiences, and with some careful calculation, he felt it was his responsibility to do something more daring to increase his reach, that at once would fulfill his duty of spreading the message about fighting climate change, while getting the attention of his peers. Desperate times call for desperate measures, they say. So that very day, Parker Liautaud decided he'd become the youngest person in the history of the world to set foot on the Geographic North Pole.

To achieve this goal, Parker enlisted the partnership and guidance of environmental campaigner Doug Stoup, with whom he raised all the necessary funding for their trip. This independent fundraising was important to Parker, as he didn't want the tenor of his trip, which was to get a message out to the young people of the world about climate change

and global warming, to be confused with some thrill-seekers PR stunt. It would surely be a thrilling expedition, but as anyone who has been to polar regions knows, the reality of a trip to the Arctic can't be undertaken with anything but complete and utter reverence for the innumerable dangers that are sure to arise, even for the most seasoned adventurer.

This is the part of the story where Parker Liautaud finds himself at odds with his forbearer, Sir Ernest Shackleton, who said, "Superhuman effort isn't worth a damn, unless it achieves results."

On Parker and Doug's attempt to reach the North Pole, their journey was cut short just 15 miles short of its destination. The Geographic North Pole is simply a GPS location in the Arctic Ocean, and in the window of time they approached it, shifting polar ice sheets didn't allow them the opportunity to make landfall. For 14 days they waited for a break, but it never came. At last, with supplies dwindling, and being no closer to their destination for their patience, they decided with heavy hearts to abort the mission.

It pained Parker immensely to fail this way, and to fail so publicly. Mainly, what really wore on him was not fulfilling his promise to their sponsors, the scientific community, and above all, his peers, who he was asking so much of. Ultimately, the situation was what it was, and both men had to acknowledge that as far as their journey went, the Arctic environment "held complete control over us... and we'd have to respect that." Their superhuman effort wouldn't yield the desired result. To consider, as Shackleton said, that such efforts, that *their* efforts weren't worth a damn. Or worse, if they were in vain...

In 2010, Parker Liautaud failed to be the youngest person in the history of the world to reach the Geographic North Pole. But it was in that moment of failure, 1000 miles from home and freezing in a torn-up tent in the Arctic, that Parker remembered why he was out there - to serve a greater purpose than his own. In that sense, Parker succeeded. News of the 15-year-old explorer's attempt gained a bit of traction, and each time a new set of eyes were trained on his story, there was a new opportunity to spread his message about fighting climate change.

It didn't take long for Parker's passion to grab a hold of him again. A year later, in 2011, Parker did in fact reach the Geographic North Pole (though at this time, there was no record at stake, as he had been beaten by a younger adventurer). Shortly thereafter, having conquered what they set out to, he and Doug Stoup began to organize what would become The Willis Resilience Expedition, setting their sights on reaching the other pole. On this expedition, they ultimately set a record for making the fastest human-powered trek from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole (a 397-mile journey in just 22 days, while trailing a 200lb pulk). In the process, Parker became the youngest man in history to complete the journey to the South Pole.

If it weren't for the endless stream of videos showcasing Parker addressing enthralled audiences at the United Nations Foundation, TED, or the Clinton Global Initiative, to name a few, it'd be difficult to imagine he's a leading authority on modern polar exploration. But as it turns out, Parker is unassuming in appearance alone, and his credentials speak for themselves.

At The World Economic Forum in 2014, in Davos, Parker Liautaud commanded a room of influential global leaders with his tales from the ends of the earth. Wearing a blue blazer and tie, and standing behind the heavy, wooden podium, he looked no different from any of the businessmen and women in the audience who were eagerly taking his story in - but anybody who knows Parker Liautaud will tell you, what you see isn't always what you get. Parker is extraordinary in many ways, whether he looks the part or not. And perhaps his many, selfless efforts living the environmental advocacy he preaches around the world will prove, over the long haul, to be his most extraordinary achievement yet.

So, what's left for the man who has literally been to the ends of the earth? Well, a lot can happen in a short period of time, especially for someone with the drive and determination of Parker.

If you go to Parker's Flickr account, there is an album with images of a skinny, 15-year-old Parker pulling 25 lb. tires through the grass, trying to simulate dragging the weight of the pulk across the Arctic. Those images are a long way off from the Parker of today, who is a gristled veteran of four polar expeditions. But what has remained the same is his dedication to the cause. All this just goes to show you that youthful energy, with proper guidance, and pointed in the right direction, can accomplish amazing things.

While his personal achievements are impressive, Parker finds a greater satisfaction in knowing that his generation is more informed about global warming and climate change, thanks to his efforts at the poles. That said, Parker remains as active as ever, trying to inspire involvement from the youth around the world. Climate advocacy needs young, passionate people to step up and be the leaders of tomorrow. After all, climate change isn't an ordinary problem that can be solved by any one person. It will take the teamwork, dedication, and passion of a lot of people - a lot of *extraordinary* people, who like Parker, aspire towards a similarly daring dream: to save the globe.

*When making your choice in life, do not neglect to live.*

Samuel Johnson

**Call to Action:** Learn more about Parker's advocacy work as an environmental campaigner: One Young World.  
<https://www.oneyoungworld.com/>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute  
[www.stonesoupleadership.org](http://www.stonesoupleadership.org)  
[www.soup4youngworld.com](http://www.soup4youngworld.com)