



*LETTER TO THE EDITOR – THE KOOBI FORA CHRONICLES*

## **On the rail of Human Evolution – the Koobi Fora field school (Kenya)**

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**T**he opportunity to spend a summer in Africa and participate in the Paleoanthropology Field School is the dream of every anthropologist.

On June 12, 2011 I left Portugal towards Heathrow. Susana Carvalho (a teacher in Coimbra) and Liliana Carvalho (another student of the Master in Human Evolution and Biology) were there, and we followed together to Kenya. Upon arrival at the Nairobi airport, the staff was waiting to lead us to the hotel. We left the bags and went to

the National Museum of Kenya, where Jack Harris – a professor at the Rutgers University who was the director of the field school at the time – was waiting for us. After the presentations, we visited the museum. I was amazed at the entrance. The National Museum is a multi-disciplinary institution whose role is to collect, preserve, study, document and present Kenya's cultural and natural heritage. The museum is outstanding!

The Field School began officially on 15th June. Early in the morning, we left the hotel

towards the Mugie Ranch. The roads were bad, and the Field School vehicles were old, so it was common for them to break down numerous times. The staff was composed of several good mechanics who solved these kinds of problems.

After 11 hours of traveling, we reached the Mugie Ranch. It is believed that the landscape currently observed is similar to that which existed in Lake Turkana millions of years ago. So we had a week of lectures *in situ* to better understand what was later going to be observed in Koobi Fora. Our campsite in the reserve had no physical barriers to the animals that lived there. Throughout the week, we had the visit of a giraffe, Lawrence, who unfortunately was later killed by poachers. I have a funny story involving that giraffe; it did not like girls and whenever it could, it tried kicking them. Once I was taking a bath, Lawrence appeared to feed on the tree that held the shower and started to quench its thirst from the shower water. So, I did not have enough water to finish my bath! I also had the opportunity to see a lioness with her cubs. It was very funny. The wildlife lived very close to where we were camping.

We spent four weeks in Koobi Fora (northern Kenya). This area is only sparsely populated with Dassanech, Turkana and Gabra people. Koobi Fora is a Gabbro expression meaning “place of the Commiphora”, a bush that is common in the area.

The trip to the Koobi Fora Base Camp took two days. The landscape that we observed during the trip was indescribable. Being near

the rift valley was a fantastic experience. The Base Camp was fanciful with Lake Turkana near us. After, we travelled to Ileret where we spent two weeks (one in classes and another in excavations). When the excavation started, the group was splitted. Half of the group stayed in Ileret and the other half went to Karari. On the second week the groups shifted places. After those two weeks, we had two days to study for the final exam, after which everything was packed and we traveled back to Nairobi. We made several stops during the return trip. In these stops, we always had to assemble and disassemble the camp. Our last stop was at Lake Naivasha, where we had fantastic conditions for camping and a breathtaking scenery. Moreover, we could spend time observing arboreal primates.

It was a unique experience to excavate the footprints of *Homo Erectus*, with roughly 1.5 million years. Prospecting the different Koobi Fora formations, we had the opportunity to see the sites from where the fossils we studied in the classroom were recovered.

The field school had such a broad spectrum of topics like Ecology and Primate Studies, Geology, Vegetation, Taphonomy, Archaeology, Holocene, Hominids, Zooarchaeology, Ethnoarchaeology, and Actualistic Studies. The contact with leading researchers from different fields was very important. All this experience made me a more methodical and thoughtful investigator, and undoubtedly, more professional.

For such an “adventure”, you must have an enormous capacity for adaptation and flexibility. The health conditions are not very

good; there is no health staff in the Field School. Thus, becoming sick was the part of this experience that I most hated. I hope this issue is improved.

During six weeks, our “house” was a tent, and baths were taken at Lake Turkana. In

Africa, there are many dangers and we must always be alert, particularly with animals such as snakes, scorpions and crocodiles. It is very difficult to communicate with our family, because there was almost no mobile phone network. Nonetheless, I advise everyone to live this experience.