

An expedition along the contours of an ancient sea

Expedition Zechstein, a 15,000 kilometre monster tour along the contours of the ancient Zechstein sea, is intended to draw attention to magnesium chloride from Veendam. The figurehead of the event is bike trial athlete Rick Koekoek from Erica.

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Expedition Zechstein



In a month and a half from now, the first leg of Expedition Zechstein will begin. Starting in Veendam, the expedition entails a monster tour measuring no less than 15,000 kilometres along the contours of a sea that disappeared millions of years ago. Along the edges of this ancient sea, participants will either ride a bike, motorbike, inline skate, sail in a sailing boat or kayak, or skydive. Doing it whilst playing soccer, running, or simply walking is also possible in this sporting challenge. Expedition Zechstein is an ambitious project, conceived by Richard Danel and bike trial athlete Rick Koekoek from Erica, a village in the Dutch province of Drenthe. Danel is a doctor and researcher at the Magnesium Health Institute in Groningen.

Zechstein Sea

The magnesium salt was discovered during gas production in the seventies. The magnesium chloride beneath Veendam is sediment, a remainder of the ancient Zechstein Sea that was located there 250 million years ago. It extended far and wide across the area that is now known as northwestern Europe. It was a shallow sea in a harsh and barren period with a desert climate. The sea ran dry regularly as water evaporated and salt was left behind. This happened countless times and with each time the salt layer became a little thicker. The layer of salt was eventually buried and stored deep underground, unexposed to pollution and other disturbances. Currently, the mineral salts are extracted from various sources in a number of countries. The source below Veendam is considered to be the purest with regards to pollution and lies at a depth of about 1,600 metres, relatively close to the surface.

The expedition consists of several stages and will be led by a core team of both Dutch and international athletes, including kite surfer Nick Jacobson and racing driver Peter Versluis. The aim is for local athletes to join at each individual stage. The entire project is designed to bring magnesium chloride from Veendam to the attention of the public. The figurehead is Rick Koekoek, a bike trial athlete who has been in the global top ten for years now. "The first leg of the expedition leads us into Germany and covers a distance of 150 to 200 kilometres", says Rianne Hooiveld of the Zechstein Minerals company. At Zechstein Minerals, magnesium salt is processed for applications in the food industry, wellness, and alternative healthcare. The company is the main sponsor of the expedition. Hooiveld: "We want to ride this first leg of the journey together with sports clubs and schools. The core team will then continue onwards to follow the contours of the old Zechstein Sea".

At the end of the journey, some 15,000 kilometres will have been logged on the tracker. "It should all work out", says Danel, who himself undertook a similar monster tour 15 years ago. Together with fellow doctor Jur Lamers, they drove their motorbikes to and through Siberia. A journey of 20,000 kilometres.

The idea for this expedition arose spontaneously during a meeting of people involved in organising the Magnesium Days in Veendam, says Danel. The Magnesium Days are a two-day event held by all companies involved in the extraction and processing of magnesium, such as Nedmag, Zechstein Minerals, and Zechsal. Koekoek performed acrobatic stunts on his bike there as well. Danel: "I have known Rick for years. He is a fantastic athlete who appeals to many young people. He uses magnesium oil against muscle pain. Since we mainly focus on young people, Rick is the ideal ambassador to showcase the importance of magnesium for your health". The first leg of the expedition starts in the second week of



Bike trial athlete Rick Koekoek: "Naturally we have prepared scenarios for each leg, but how it all will turn out in practice, no idea." PHOTO JAN ANNINGA

October in Veendam, the municipality in the northeastern Netherlands where the magnesium salt is extracted from the soil from the so-called Zechstein source. Using the latest geological data, the contours of the primal sea are mapped out as accurately as possible. A sea that stretched across present day northwestern Europe - roughly from England to Poland and from Scandinavia to southern Germany. The contours run along at least thirteen different countries.

"When exactly we will end up back in Veendam remains the question. We really will be pioneering".

"We want to connect top athletes to amateur athletes. Disabled athletes should be able to participate as well", says Danel. "It really will be an expedition though. The journey will not just be on well-trodden paths, but also through inhospitable terrain and on the sea". There is a Guinness World Record attempt on the agenda too. The athletes plan to kitesurf the crossing from Scotland to the Netherlands. The finish line will be back in Veendam. Another

Many uncertainties surrounding magnesium

Richard Danel is convinced that magnesium has a healing effect. He expresses and argues this at various symposiums and lectures around the world. The doctor and researcher is currently involved in a research study on magnesium that is being conducted at the UMCG in Groningen under the leadership of Professor of Internal Medicine, Stephan Bakker. At least forty people are participating in this study. Bakker and researcher Joëlle Schutten are investigating the effects of magnesium on blood pressure, intestinal health, and vascular stiffness. Bakker: "We do scientific research to ascertain whether magnesium has any effects and to discover what those effects

record attempt is planned for that moment: a HALO parachute jump, which is a traditionally military skydive where the parachute is only opened at the very last moment. To prepare for this, Koekoek is training steadily: "It is going to be the first time. Naturally we have prepared scenarios for each leg, but how it all will turn out in practice, no idea. We will learn how to continue

would be. There are many uncertainties surrounding magnesium". The Magnesium Health Institute and Nedmag sponsor the research, but have no involvement in its interpretation. Bakker: "As a university medical centre we are interested in the effects of magnesium. For them, it is about finding out the truth". The participants of the study take magnesium supplements or a placebo three times a day for 24 weeks. Schutten: "In order to achieve even better research results, we are looking for more people who want to participate. Ideally we would like to have 160 participants, healthy people between 45 and 75 years of age, to map out the effects of various magnesium supplements".

to do it along the way. Stage by stage we will work it out. We do intend on covering the whole route in one go. But when exactly we will end up back in Veendam remains the question. We really will be pioneering".

Danel: "That is right. It is new to all of us and it requires a lot of preparation. Making contact with all kinds of

institutions and governments; there are so many different countries and different laws and regulations apply in each one. Through social media, we hope to encourage athletes in each country to join us. We are looking to cooperate with all kinds of branches of sports", says Danel. He hopes for more female candidates. "Currently, it is mostly men that are applying. We will start out small. It is expected that at every leg

more and more people will participate. The first Dakar Rally also started with just about a dozen cars".



Magnesium salt from Veendam. PHOTO ARCHIVE DVHN



The extraction of magnesium salt in Veendam. Richard Danel, a doctor and researcher at the Magnesium Health Institute in Groningen, is on the right. PHOTO ARCHIVE DVHN