

THE UN INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF PLANET EARTH – BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES

W Eder¹ and E de Mulder²

¹Dept. of Earth Sciences, University of Munich, Luisenstrasse 37, 80333 Munich, Germany, Email: w.eder-geo@iaag.geo.uni-muenchen.de; ²IYPE Secretariat, NGU, Geological Survey of Norway, 7491 Trondheim, Norway, Email: e.demulder@planet.nl

ABSTRACT

The “International Year of Planet Earth” (IYPE) is a joint initiative by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) and UNESCO and runs from 2007 to 2009.

Keywords Promotion of Earth Sciences

BACKGROUND AND ACTIVITIES

When, in the year 2000, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) tried to match our current knowledge about Planet Earth against the application of such knowledge in daily life, it found a major discrepancy. The Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and hurricane Katrina in 2005 only confirmed the existence of that gap; knowledge about natural hazards existed, but it was not applied – or not applied adequately – to protect vulnerable societies from devastation.

Another observation was that fewer and fewer future experts in geoscience had been recruited at universities since the early 1980s, despite the fact that society needed more and more of them to help reduce the impact of such disasters. Moreover, industry now cries out for more geo-experts to find those new Earth resources for which the world is desperately searching. Those experts are the same ones that find innovative solutions to reducing the environmental impact of such necessary resource exploitation.

These observations motivated us to explore how the public and politicians could be urged to reverse these trends. We chose an international, rather than national, approach and began the long road towards the proclamation of an International Year of Planet Earth (IYPE) under the UN system. IYPE aims to capture people’s imagination with the exciting knowledge we possess about our planet, and to see that knowledge used more effectively to make the Earth a safer, healthier and wealthier place for our children and grandchildren. That, we believe, can be achieved by building on the knowledge accumulated by the world’s 400,000 Earth scientists, and is expressed by the IYPE subtitle: *Earth Science for Society*.

Two earlier events served as models. **International Geophysical Year** (1957-58) uncovered many facts about our planet, which was then seen for the first time from space. IGY attracted lots of public attention, and many youngsters were inspired to begin professional careers in Earth sciences. More recently, in 2002, the Germans celebrated their “Jahr der Geowissenschaften” with many public events and with an attractive logo that was later donated to the IYPE. That public exposure resulted in a much higher enrollment of German students in the Earth sciences in subsequent years.

Soon after the inception of IYPE, UNESCO’s (former) Earth Science Division joined in, followed by 25 Associate Partners and 11 Founding Partners. To achieve its aims and ambitions, and to collect public and political support for this issue, we then approached the United Nations system. That process went through various stages, beginning at UNESCO where the United Republic of Tanzania successfully launched the initiative in the Executive Board in April 2005 (Figure 1), followed by the General Conference in October. In December 2005, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution 192 proclaiming 2008 to be the *International Year of Planet Earth*.



Figure 1. Prof. Mohammed Sheya introduced the International Year of Planet Earth in the UN system for the first time in the UNESCO Executive Board, April 2005

Shortly afterwards, the IYPE Corporation was registered as a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) Corporation in the USA, consisting of a Board of Directors and a Secretariat based at the Norwegian Geological Survey in Trondheim. After the UN proclamation, additional support for the IYPE grew rapidly. By December 2008, 24 new International Partners were providing financial and other support. Simultaneously, geoscientific communities in individual countries began to establish IYPE National Committees (Figure 2). That number had increased to 77 by December 2008, while several more are currently in an advanced stage of development. These countries are widely distributed across the globe (Figure 3).

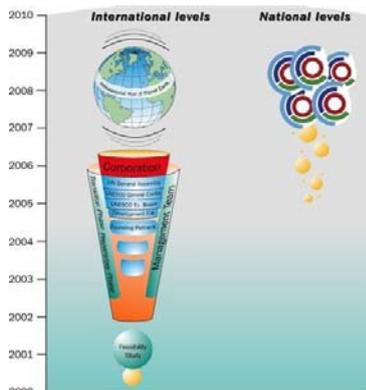


Figure 2. The development of the International Year of Planet Earth since the year 2000

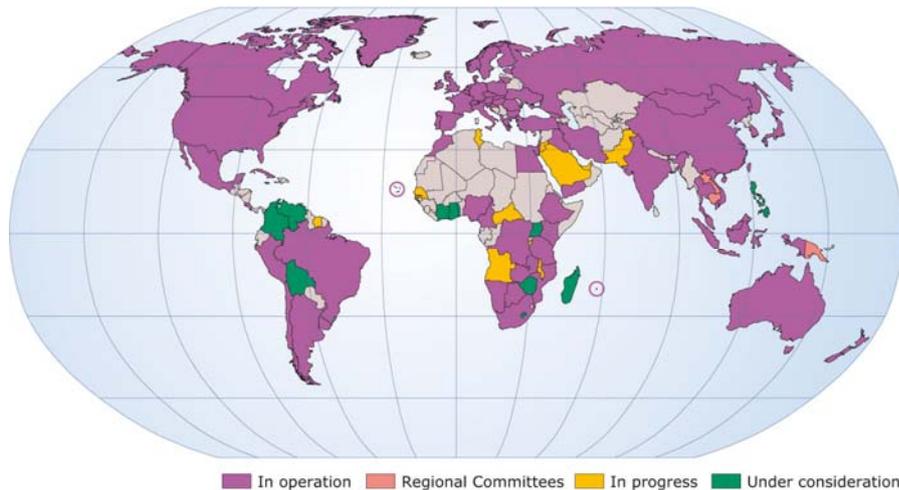


Figure 3. Countries with a National Committee for IYPE established (in purple), or in development (in yellow and green). One Regional Committee for IYPE has been established for East and Southeast Asia. Situation as of December 2008.

Although the International Year was proclaimed by the UN for 2008, its initiators expanded that into a triennium, starting in early 2007 and closing in December 2009. A triennium was considered the minimum needed to implement at least part of our ambitious plan.

The main activities of the IYPE are coordinated through Science and Outreach Programmes. Both programmes essentially operate in a 'bottom-up' mode. The Science Programme consists of 10 broad, societally relevant and multidisciplinary themes: health, climate, groundwater, ocean, soils, deep Earth, megacities, resources, hazards and life. Brochures on each of these themes are available in hard copy or may be downloaded from IYPE's website: www.yearofplanetearth.org.

The Outreach Programme is mainly being implemented at the national level. A global launch event was organized at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in February 2008. In addition, continent-wide launch events took place for Africa (in Arusha, Tanzania) and for Latin America (in Brasilia, Brazil). On an international level, brochures and flyers are produced and the global IYPE web-portal is maintained. Moreover, the numerous activities in the many countries with IYPE National Committees are being monitored and registered. As one of the many legacy items, a report with information on the entire IYPE operation will be produced for the United Nations in 2010.

Education is an essential element in the International Year of Planet Earth. Many of the national and international activities involve students and focus on participation by secondary and primary school pupils. An example of student involvement was the IYPE global launch event in Paris. In preparation for that event, 18–22-year-old students from around the world submitted essays and poems each dealing with one International Year theme. National Committees and the IYPE Secretariat evaluated them and selected the best. Through national and international sponsorship, some 200 winning students from almost every corner of the planet were awarded a free trip to Paris to participate actively in the launch event, including interacting with VIPs on pressing issues concerning Planet Earth.

The International Year of Planet Earth provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to highlight the urgent needs for knowledge about the Earth - knowledge that will help to make our human societies wiser, safer and healthier. You can contribute by generating ideas for implementation of these goals or by actively supporting current ideas, on both national and international levels, even after the triennium is over. Individuals might wish to contact their National Committee or the IYPE Secretariat (iype.secretariat@ngu.no).

Representatives of industry or foundations might wish to consider supporting the IYPE both conceptually and financially. From the German 2002 *GeoJahr* we learned that this International Year can and will work. If such excitement for the Earth sciences could be generated by one country in just one year, we are confident that worldwide exposure and outreach of the Earth sciences in 70 countries during *three* years will call forth the new generation of Earth scientists we need. In 2008 and 2009, thousands of volunteers and professionals will ensure that 'The Greatest Geo-Show on Earth' will not pass unnoticed. Don't miss out! Join IYPE now!