Recent advances towards an International Year of Planet Earth

— A letter to fellow geoscientist

Dear fellow geoscientist,

I write to draw your attention to recent advances towards an International Year of Planet Earth, which is a joint initiative of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) and UNESCO. The Year, proclaimed for 2008 by the UN General Assembly in late December 2005 will be the central year in a Planet Earth triennium that will begin in January 2007 and end in December 2009.

The central aims and ambitions of this triennium are to demonstrate the great potential of the Earth sciences in the building of a safer, healthier and wealthier society, and to encourage more widespread and effective application of this potential by targeting politicians and other decision-makers, educational systems, and the general public.

UN proclamation implies that all 191 UN nations have adopted these aims and ambitions and are all willing to contribute to their implementation. Never before have all nations on Earth expressed their dedication to learn from and apply geoscientific knowledge in both day-to-day and longer term policy and practice.

During the preparatory phases of the International Year, a Management Team brought the initiative to the United Nations, attracted 12 Founding Partners and 26 Associate Partners, and raised the funds necessary to pave the way for implementation. On March 16th 2006, the initiative was registered as a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) Corporation under the laws of the State of Delaware, USA. The Management Team has been disbanded, but IUGS and UNESCO have invited individual members of that Team to serve temporarily as the Board of Officers of the Corporation until a fully-constituted Board has been established; it is expected that this will take place in August 2006. At the same time, an outsourced Secretariat will be established, and we hereby invite all major geoscientific bodies to consider hosting the Year's Secretariat. For more information, please

check the website: www.yearofplanetearth.org, under Secretariat.

The Science and Outreach Programmes have been in place for some time. Science Implementation Teams, the primary tasks of which are to evaluate Expressions of Interest and Project Proposals, are now in process of formation. We plan to dedicate about half of the income for the International Year to outreach activities and the other half to science projects for the ten selected Science themes (see website).

Fund-raising is now the first priority of the Board of Officers. The mining sector and the oil and gas industry are seen as the likely main sponsors and donors, not least because they stand to profit substantially from the wide-ranging outcomes of the International Year. In an improving political climate with respect to sustainable use of the Earth and its materials, outcomes include the securing of future specialist expertise by attracting increasing numbers of students opting for training in the Earth sciences (as was the case following the German National Year of the Geosciences in 2002). We aim to raise 20 million dollars to enable us to achieve the Year's goals, and to ensure that this "greatest geoshow on Earth" will be remembered alongside the formative International Geophysical Year 1957/1958 half a century ago.

A particularly important action that is fundamental to the successful implementation of the Year is the establishment of National Committees of the Year of Planet Earth. At the time of writing, 10 such National Committees are up and running (in Austria, Germany, India, Ireland, Japan, Mongolia, Namibia, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK). In twenty other countries such Committees are being actively developed and the process has been initiated in a further 13 countries. Such National Committees are independent bodies while, at the same time, having links with the International Corporation. The success of the International Year very much depends on quality and range of activity at the national level, not least

because of the need to attract, in a sustained way, the attention and engagement of both public and political life at all levels.

We call upon all members of the geoscience community around the world to recognize the opportunities offered by this global initiative, and to provide their support at all scales, from global to local, to make this a "Once in a lifetime" event. Given the Year's worldwide political support, rising commodity values, and a profession that increasingly recognizes the need for strong mutual support in the realization of the societal potential and value of Earth science, the situation has never been more favourable.

Seize the day.

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