The International Year of Planet Earth 2007–2009 —the triennium begins!

The International Year of Planet Earth's triennial programme was launched in some style, and on three continents, in January 2007. Geoscientists from “the round Earth's imagined corners” gathered for the inaugural meeting of the Board of the International Year of Planet Earth (IYPE) Corporation on 9 and 10 January 2007. The 15 Board Members (Figure 1) were joined by IYPE National Committee representatives, International and Associate Partners, observers and by Professor Aubrey Manning, a Goodwill Ambassador of the IYPE.

The two-day meeting at the Geological Society of London marked the superseding of the 5-year old IYPE Management Team by the newly established Board. The wide ranging review of the status and condition of the IYPE was achieved in a constructive atmosphere. Some important actions and revisions emerged. These included conditional approval of the Corporation's Statutes and Bye Laws, and an announcement of the establishment of the IYPE's professional Secretariat (at the NGU in Trondheim). Representatives of 20 of the IYPE's 31 National Committees provided reports on their activities, and several aspects of the Science and Outreach programmes were endorsed. The meeting was creatively critical on a number of important matters, including a resolve to relax constraints on the size of the Science Implementation Teams from 8 to 10 members. In addition, the Board agreed to make greater efforts to appoint a suitably prominent individual as its Chair. It also adopted a revised approach to budget planning; indeed, much of the committee's time was spent in exploring fund-raising options, a matter of no small importance as the IYPE enters the first year of its triennial programme. (These and other items considered by the Board may be viewed in the condensed Minutes to be found on the IYPE website: www.yearofplanetearth.org)

Figure 1 Members of the Board of the International Year of Planet Earth at the inaugural meeting.

Figure 2 Launching of 4567 balloons, half of which bore the GSL logo and the other half of the IYPE, each balloon representing 1 million years of Earth history.

On 10 January, time was taken to stage the European launch of the IYPE's triennium. Fortified by a happy coincidence in the form of the Bicentenary in 2007 of the Geological Society of London (GSL), Board members, GSL Fellows and schoolchildren gathered in the courtyard of Burlington House, Piccadilly, to hear brief orations by Professor Richard Fortey FRS, President of the GSL, and Professor Aubrey Manning, IYPE Goodwill Ambassador. Professor Manning congratulated the world's oldest geological society on reaching its bicentenary and welcomed the International Year of Planet Earth prior to the launching of 4567 balloons, half of which bore the GSL logo and the other half that of the IYPE, each balloon representing 1 million years of Earth history (Figure 2).

The global nature of the International Year of Planet Earth was also marked by celebratory launches on two other continents. South America's launch took place on 25 January in Sao Paulo, Brazil, under the aegis of Brazil's IYPE National Committee, which has already prepared an impressive science and outreach programme for 2007–2009. Sao Paulo's IYPE balloon was a single one that compensated for the lack of great numbers by its impressive size (Figure 3). Dr. Eduardo de Mulder, IYPE's Executive Director, was present at the launch and spoke about the important relation between the International Corporation and the National Committees; he went on to outline examples of outreach and science activities in other countries and, of course, other balloon launches.

Yet both the London and the Sao Paulo launch events were forestalled by India. Again, it was a balloon affair. On January 5th, a balloon launch took place during the annual Indian Science Congress, dedicated to Planet Earth. The venue was the small town of Chidambaram, some 200 km south of Chennai. Dr. Manmohan Singh,

Prime Minister of India, opened the Annual Science Congress of India, this year dedicated to "Planet Earth" and attended by 5000 scientists from all over India. Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, President of India, was also present and delivered a well informed address linking the Science Congress with the International Year of Planet Earth. It was President Kalam who released the balloons when surrounded by hundreds of schoolchildren, reflecting on the fact that the future is in their hands.

The rigorous work of the Board in January was followed up in February and early March by its first excursion into electronic voting. The ballot approved the Board's Minutes. Also approved were the IYPE Statutes and Bye laws, the Agreement on the Secretariat (which started its operations on January 1st). Another result of the ballot was the appointment of Professor John Dodson (Australia) as Vice Chair of the Science Programme Committee. As approved by the Board, three additional engineering geoscientists were invited to become members of three different Science Implementation Teams. These Teams will soon be asked to evaluate the Expressions of Interest in the Science programme, 32 of which having been received so far. An interesting outcome of all this activity was the resolution of the Board that, in order to maintain its momentum, it would hold its second meeting (BM2) in Paris on 20 and 21 June.

The IYPE initiators (IUGS and UNESCO) and the Corporation are indebted to Larry Woodfork for agreeing to accept temporary (Acting) Chairmanship of the Board. Several Board vacancies still remain, including the Vice Chair (to be appointed by the Board members at their meeting in June), the Chair of the Development Committee, the representatives of IGU, AGI, AAPG and AIPG, a second representative for Asia and one for Australia & Oceania (to be appointed by the National Committees).

By 4th April, National and Regional Committees had been set up by forty nations and regions. It is expected that about 15 more such Committees will be installed before the start of the UN Year in 2008.

As the work load generated by the IYPE increases in both volume and complexity, the Officers of the Board continue to serve on a daily basis. Dr. Eduardo de Mulder (Executive Director) and Dr.

Figure 3 Sao Paulo opted for size rather than numbers in launching its great celebratory balloon at the start of the IYPE triennium.

Figure 4 India took the lead in celebrating the start of the IYPE Triennium on 5 January in Chidambaram, near Chennai, as President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, released the balloons, in the company of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, 5000 scientists and hundreds of enthusiastic children.

Werner Janoschek (Goodwill Ambassador) represented the IYPE at the official launch event of the International Heliophysical Year (IHY 2007-2008) on 1 March, in Vienna, Austria, and the Executive Director represented the IYPE at the launch ceremony of the International Polar Year (IPY 2007-2008) on March 1st in Paris. The IYPE was represented by Dr. Keith Turner at the launch of the Electronic Geophysical Year (eGY) in Boulder, USA, on February 22nd. These and other formal interactions continue to strengthen the already well established cooperation between the four loosely synchronous initiatives (IYPE, IPY, IHY, eGY), which together make up a global showcase for the geosciences in general.

The Executive Director has interacted with most of the National Committees, having met in person representatives of the National Committees of Australia, Austria, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Namibia, the Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Turkey, UK, the USA and the East and Southeast Asia Region.

Together with Edward Derbyshire, he represented the IYPE at the launch of One Geology in Brighton, U.K., 12-16 March. Launched as a contribution to the IYPE, OneGeology shares the IYPE's focus on the needs and aspirations of the human community. Geological Survey and similar organizations in over 40 nations were represented in this 'conference with a difference', its one clear-cut aim being to create a global team of experts to do nothing less than make available on the worldwide web the latest and best global digital geological map information at a scale of 1:1 million—and to do so at no cost to the user. Thus, this initiative will serve not only geologists but ordinary people and their decision makers around the world.

Further launches to celebrate the IYPE are scheduled in the months ahead, notably the official launch of the United Nations Year of Planet Earth at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 12 and 13 February 2008. About 850 guests are expected, including some 500 young students from UNESCO-Associated Schools in all parts of the world. Heads of State, leading scientists and CEOs of major international companies will address four key issues dealing with Earth Sciences for Society. A Project Team, in concert with the French National Committee, is preparing this major event.

*Edward Derbyshire,
Eduardo de Mulder, and
Ted Nield
5 April 2007*