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Organisation  
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pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the Global Launch Event  
of the International Year of Planet Earth**

**UNESCO, 12 February 2008**

Distinguished Ministers,  
Mr President of the International Union of Geological Sciences,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear young students,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to UNESCO Headquarters for the Global Launch Event of the International Year of Planet Earth (IYPE).

I wish to begin by thanking all those who have come from near and far to be with us today. Let me extend my special gratitude to those Ministers who have found time in their busy schedules to take part in this event.

I would also like to welcome the other strategic partners, whose commitment, guidance and wisdom will contribute to our deliberations: government representatives; colleagues from UN sister agencies; members of the international geosciences community; business leaders; and last, but by no means least, the winners of the IYPE Student Contest, our geoscientists of the future.

I am delighted to have with me to open this event Professor Zhang Hongren, President of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS). The celebration of the International Year of Planet Earth is a joint initiative of our two organizations, and the culmination of over thirty years of successful collaboration. Indeed, I am proud to say that our International Geoscience Programme (IGCP), which aims to

promote international cooperation in the geosciences, in particular in developing countries, has served as the main model for the International Year.

May I finally take this opportunity to thank all those other partners and sponsors who have made this celebration possible – in particular the French Committee for the IYPE, which has contributed significantly to the organization of today's event.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The journey that has led us here today has been exciting and stimulating. The first milestone was reached in October 2005, when UNESCO's General Conference unanimously adopted a resolution recommending the declaration of 2008 as the International Year of Planet Earth. Just two months later, in December 2005, the UN General Assembly, following UNESCO's recommendation, adopted Resolution 192. This officially proclaimed 2008 the International Year of Planet Earth.

UNESCO was designated lead agency for the Year, in recognition of our longstanding experience in the Earth sciences, notably through the IGCP. We will be collaborating closely with UNEP and other relevant UN bodies in implementing the Year's objectives, as well as with IUGS and other Earth science societies and groups. Indeed, our partner organizations represent all continents and all major geoscientific communities across the globe.

We have also established an impressive outreach programme. With the support of UNESCO National Commissions, IYPE National Committees have been created in about 60 countries to lead awareness-raising and capacity-building activities.

What are our main goals?

The Year's ultimate aim is to draw global attention to the major role that the Earth sciences can play in helping to foster a safer, healthier and more sustainable Planet.

We are at a crossroads in human history. Never before in the 8 million-year history of humankind has our Planet been subjected to such rapid and profound changes. First among these is global warming. World attention is now focused on how to mitigate its effects; and it is imperative that we reach an international agreement on

carbon emissions by 2009. Yet climate change, however important, is just one among a series of challenges facing humanity. Urbanization, population growth, the freshwater crisis and the increasing risk of natural disasters: these also demand urgent action if we are to secure the future of our Planet. And as this Year will demonstrate: we cannot respond effectively to any of these threats without the Earth sciences.

One goal, therefore, is to raise awareness of the importance of the Earth sciences to the sustainable and equitable management of our Planet.

The Year also has the ambitious target of fostering closer collaboration between Earth scientists and policy-makers, as well as the private sector, in order to ensure that the geoscientific knowledge we have is better harnessed for the benefit for society.

Today, there are around 400,000 Earth scientists worldwide. Unfortunately, however, their numbers are dwindling. Developed and developing nations alike are witnessing a decline in the number of young people studying the Earth sciences, a situation that will inevitably lead to a lack of expertise in managing energy and mineral resources.

Hence the third major goal of this International Year: to attract more young people to the geosciences. This is why we launched the IYPE Student Contest, whose winners join us today. Later on, we will enjoy a selection of the audio, literary and visual works presented for the competition.

It is very encouraging to see that already, as a result of IYPE activities, the geosciences have been re-introduced into the secondary-school curriculum of several countries. I encourage other Member States to take steps in the same direction.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The International Year of Planet Earth will focus on ten themes, chosen for their social relevance and outreach potential. These are: health, life, megacities, climate, natural hazards, resources, soil, deep earth, groundwater and oceans.

At today's event we will concentrate on three questions that cut across these themes: the challenges for Planet Earth of population growth and climate change; the Earth's resources: threat or treat?; and how to minimize the risk, and maximize the awareness, of geohazards.

Let me introduce some of the issues involved.

In this International Year of Planet Earth, there are over 6.6 billion people living on the Earth. Many enjoy healthy and full lives, but there remain hundreds of millions of people living below the poverty line and with little hope of realizing their basic right to human security.

By 2050, the human population will probably go beyond 9 billion, with the greatest increases occurring in developing countries and in cities.

If we are to provide for the needs of present and future generations, all sharing the resources of our one small Planet, we need to better understand the functioning of the complex Earth systems and the interaction of humankind with the Earth's resources.

For the first time in human history, more than half the world's population lives in urban areas. As a result of population growth and migration, it is estimated that by 2050, over 60% of the world's population will be living in cities. Many cities have already reached their physical limits. As an alternative to building skyscrapers, underground space may provide a safer environment for some public and commercial concerns. But for this to be the case, we need much better knowledge of subsurface conditions and processes, including the detection of potential hazards.

About 50% of the world's population is concentrated within 200 km of the coastline. By 2010, 20 out of the world's 30 megacities will be on the coast, and therefore increasingly vulnerable to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and other physical hazards. The systematic observation of the marine environment is essential to mitigating these risks.

When people consider the tsunami that killed a quarter of a million people around the Indian Ocean three years ago, how many are aware that this staggering death

toll resulted from the lack of seismological monitoring stations to alert countries to the underwater earthquake that was its cause?

The quest for energy sources and raw materials has become a vital economic issue for the world's emerging and developing economies. Yet, how can a developing nation benefit from its Earth resources if it does not have enough geoscientists to advise on their effective and sustainable use?

All our fossil energy and all our mineral resources come from the Earth. Our daily supplies of water and food are also inextricably linked to the existence of healthy Earth systems. Take groundwater, for example. As the most reliable, naturally protected available source of water, it is increasingly called upon to satisfy the world's growing water needs. However, to manage this resource sustainably we need to know much more about how to replenish and conserve groundwater; and this requires knowledge about the surrounding geology.

I hope that today's event will help to stimulate greater awareness and debate about these issues.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Next, I would like to give you some examples of what UNESCO will be doing in support of the International Year of Planet Earth. The Chair of IYPE, Larry Woodfork, will be providing a more comprehensive overview later this morning.

All of UNESCO's international scientific programmes on the environment are fully mobilized behind the Year. Over the past 40 years, UNESCO has significantly contributed to building the world's knowledge base in the fields of oceanography, hydrology and the ecological and Earth sciences. This Year is an opportunity to share this knowledge and expertise, and raise awareness of its relevance to some of today's most pressing societal concerns, in particular global climate change.

UNESCO will also support the goals of IYPE through three of our flagship initiatives. These are the Man and the Biosphere programme (MAB), which now boasts 531 reserves in 105 countries; the World Heritage Programme, which includes 166 natural and 25 mixed (natural and cultural) sites; and the Global Network of Geoparks, which consists of 53 geoparks in 17 countries. These

initiatives can serve the Year in many ways, such as through showcasing spectacular examples of natural heritage, promoting sustainable practices, and raising awareness of the role of culture in environmental conservation.

Further examples of UNESCO's support for the Year include our work in disaster mitigation – in particular through the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission's efforts to establish a global tsunami early warning system. Also important is our leadership of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, where we are mobilizing partners around the world to integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning.

In addition, together with the Commission for the Geological Map of the World, UNESCO has created the 'OneGeology' project. This aims to give interactive Internet access to the geological map of our Planet, similar to 'Google Earth'. It will be of particular use to developing countries, in helping them gain access to valuable geological data and know-how.

Let me also draw your attention to the extensive range of national outreach initiatives organized by IYPE National Committees.

Examples include: the building of a new Earth Science Museum in Brazil; IYPE thematic trains crossing the sub-continent of India; and the UNESCO-sponsored Third International Conference on Geoparks to be held in Germany in June 2008.

At the regional level, I am very pleased that President Kikwete of Tanzania, who was recently elected President of the African Union, has taken the initiative of organizing the IYPE conference for Africa. I very much look forward to attending this important event in Arusha in May. It is vital that we analyse the impact of the issues I have mentioned here in the context of the African continent.

Finally, let me mention the International Geological Congress, which will be held in Oslo in August 2008. Convened under the patronage of UNESCO, and bringing together around 7,000 geoscientists, this is another key event in 2008 that will contribute to putting geosciences in the service of society firmly on the map.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Peace and security, the UN Charter notes, “depend on the social and economic advancement of people”. There can be no social and economic advancement without knowledge, no knowledge without education, science and research. Our knowledge of the Earth system is our insurance policy for the future and in this interdependent world we must work as one to find ways of using the Earth resources in a sustainable and equitable way.

I wish you every success in your work over the next day and a half. To help stimulate your debates, a winning IYPE student essay will be read out at the beginning of each session. I also invite you to visit the exhibitions on display, kindly brought by IYPE partners and sponsors. The UNESCO exhibition “Planet Earth: from Space to Place”, which highlights UNESCO’s interdisciplinary perspective of Planet Earth, and was created for our 2007 General Conference, has been reinstalled in a re-edited form.

Let me also take this opportunity to inform you of the recently launched UNESCO publication, “Making Peace with the Earth”, a collection of essays that may further feed our reflections on the future of our Planet.

I am confident that you will have very rich and fruitful discussions, and look forward to meeting with you again tomorrow at the conclusion of this Global Launch Event.

Thank you.