



Sir Arthur C. Clarke, Colombo, Sri Lanka



By Shabidul Alam, National Geographic

Space images received from
the European Space Agency
(ESA)

Audio greeting to the global launch event of

International Year of Planet Earth 2008

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Hello! This is Arthur Clarke, speaking from my home in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

I'm very happy to join you on this occasion, when the International Year of Planet Earth is being inaugurated at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

I'm sorry that my health does not permit me to join you in person. I have fond memories of attending major international conferences at UNESCO over the years. I've always cherished my close association with the organisation, especially since I received the UNESCO-Kalinga prize for popularisation of science in 1961.

The International Year of Planet Earth is being observed at a crucial juncture in our relationship with the planet. There are now clear signs that our growing numbers and our many activities are impacting the Earth's natural systems, causing planetary stress. We have had local or regional indicators of this stress for decades, and more recently we have confirmed our unmistakable role in climate change. If we're looking for the smoking gun, we only need to look in the mirror...

So there has never been a greater urgency to restore our strained relationship with the Earth.

In such a conversation, who speaks for the Earth?

Almost 30 years ago, my late friend astronomer Carl Sagan posed this question in his trail-blazing television series *Cosmos*. And this is how he answered it:

Begin Quote

"Our loyalties are to the species and to the planet. *We speak for earth*. Our obligation to survive and flourish is owed not just to ourselves, but also to that cosmos ancient and vast from which we spring!"

End of quote

I sincerely hope that the Year of Planet Earth would mark a turning point in how we listen to Earth's distress call -- and how we respond to it with knowledge, understanding and imagination.

My mind goes back to the International Geophysical Year, which was observed in 1957 – 58. Both the former Soviet Union and the United States launched artificial satellites during that period, thus ushering in the Space Age. Going to space was an important evolutionary step for our species – one that distinguishes our period in history from all the preceding ones. For the first time, we could look back on our home planet from the vantage point in orbit, and that gave us a totally new perspective.

The beautiful images of Earth from space inspired much public interest that led to the Earth Day and the global environmental movement in the 1970s.

Of course, I have suggested that 'Earth' is a complete misnomer for our planet when three quarters of it is covered by ocean. But I guess now it's a bit too late to change the name to planet Ocean!

Fifty years after the IGY and the dawn of the Space Age, do we know enough about how our planet works?

Thanks to advances in earth sciences and space sciences, we have unravelled many mysteries that baffled scientists for generations. We now monitor the land, atmosphere and ocean from ground based and space based platforms. Armies of scientists are pouring over tera-bytes of data routinely gathered by our many sentinels keeping vigil over our planet.

We don't yet fully understand certain phenomena, and there are still gaps in how we process and disseminate scientific knowledge. This is why, for example, the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 arrived without any public warning in Sri Lanka and many other coastal regions. Within minutes of the undersea quake off Sumatra, geologists and oceanographers around the world knew what was happening. But they lacked the means of reaching authorities who could evacuate people to safety.

For this reason, I'm very glad to hear that the Year of Planet Earth is placing equal emphasis on creating new knowledge and its public outreach. Today, more than ever, we need the public understanding and engagement of science. As UNESCO has been advocating for 60 years, public engagement is essential for science to influence policy and improve lives.

In fact, with our planet under stress, we often have to act before we fully understand some natural processes. That is where we have to combine our best judgement and imagination.

We also need to change the way we use resources and energy. Our modern civilisation depends on energy, but we can't allow oil and coal to slowly bake all life on our planet. In my 90th birthday reflections a few weeks ago, I listed three wishes I dearly want to see happen – and one of them is to kick our current addiction to oil, and instead adopt clean energy sources. For over a decade, I've been monitoring various new energy experiments, which have yet to produce commercial scale results. Climate change has now added a new sense of urgency to this quest.

So we face many challenges as we embark on the International Year of Planet Earth. I hope this year's many activities will help us to better listen to our home planet, and then act with knowledge and imagination.

This is Arthur Clarke, wishing you every success in this endeavour.

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