

Press release

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International Council for Science Launches International Polar Year 2007-2008, an Endeavor of Historical Proportions

***With environmental changes at poles driving planetary transformation,
scientists energized by opportunity to “make a difference”***

Suzhou, China—Sparking a sense of urgency, enthusiasm and unity of purpose in the scientific community reminiscent of galvanizing endeavors such as man’s ventures into space and the Human Genome Project, the International Council for Science (ICSU) today formally launched an ambitious global programme for polar research that already has attracted more than 1000 research proposals submitted by scientists from around the world.

The International Polar Year (IPY) 2007-2008—which is being co-sponsored by the World Meteorological Organization—was officially adopted by ICSU members at their 28th General Assembly in Suzhou, China. Yet the planning for IPY was already well underway. For more than a year ICSU and WMO have been assembling what is expected to be a burst of internationally coordinated research that will focus on dramatic and disturbing changes occurring in the polar regions and analyze their broader environmental and economic importance for the planet.

“We’ve seen scientists from a wide range of disciplines immediately drawn to this endeavor because they seem to share a sense that if we don’t pay considerable attention to the poles now, we will have missed a major opportunity and avoided our responsibilities as explorers of the planet,” said Dr. David J. Carlson, director of the IPY International Programme Office established by ICSU and WMO and based at the British Antarctic Survey. “I think intellectually, and perhaps even emotionally, scientists want to be part of something that will make a difference, and polar research, given how it can help us understand such pressing matters as global climate change, certainly affords that opportunity.”

The ICSU commitment to the IPY plan comes as polar research is increasingly capturing the attention of not only scientists but policy makers and the general public as well. Just a few weeks ago scientists at the US National Snow and Ice Data Center generated headlines with their alarming findings that over the past century

there has been a significant melting of the Arctic ice cap. Carlson noted that the issues raised by this kind of research show why there is a pressing need for a coordinated and collaborative international effort to address the implications of changes occurring in the Arctic and Antarctic.

“If we want to take polar research to the next level, to, for example, understand fully the implications of melting ice caps for ocean circulation, for different societies and economies around the world—and how human activities contribute to these changes—then we need scientists working across disciplines and across international boundaries,” he said.

IPY is at the moment functioning as a focal point and organizing instrument for new polar research projects. Scientists—some from such unlikely places as Egypt, Greece and Malaysia-- have been submitting details of proposed work through a special IPY Web site (www.ipy.org). IPY officials fielding the proposals are constantly updating an online “planning chart” detailing projects by region of interest (north, south or both) and by research topic to show opportunities for collaboration and areas in need of attention. Countries also are beginning to commit resources. For example, Canada recently earmarked CAD \$150 million for IPY-related research, China has promised to make a strong contribution and Germany has pledged, among other things, to devote research vessels to both poles. Overall, there are currently 50 countries contributing to the initiative.

It’s clear from the project submissions that IPY 2007-2008, which officially kicks off on 1 March 2007 and runs until 1 March 2009, is expanding the boundaries of polar research. Along with studies focused on somewhat familiar polar topics such as depletion of the ozone layers and permafrost depths, there are projects seeking extensive surveys of marine ecosystems and polar wildlife along with investigations into the cultural, historical and social processes of societies in and around the polar regions. The polar regions are also ideal locations to conduct new studies that probe the mysteries of the earth’s interior and look out to the sun and cosmos.

“We view this IPY as an opportunity to spark a particularly broad range of creative research endeavors that can really capture the public’s imagination,” said Dr. Ian Allison, from the Australian Government’s Antarctic Division and one of two co-chairs of the ICSU/WMO Joint Committee charged with scientific planning and coordination of IPY. “IPY projects can show the world why what happens in these remote, harsh locations is intimately connected to our past, present and our future and, by doing so, they can also attract a new generation of scientists to the field of polar research.”

It has been almost a half-century since ICSU last initiated a global polar research project. The International Geophysical Year of 1957-1958 exploited technologies developed during World War II and prompted such landmark achievements as the discovery of the Van Allen Radiation Belts encircling the world, the first estimates of the size of the Antarctica’s ice mass and confirmed the theory of continental drift. ICSU scientists view IPY 2007-2008 as an opportunity to exploit modern technological advances, ranging from satellite remote sensing capabilities to genomic analysis, to leave an equally impressive legacy.

Founded in 1931, the International Council for Science (ICSU) is a non-governmental organization representing a global membership that includes both national scientific bodies (103 members) and international scientific unions (27 members).

Through this international network, ICSU coordinates interdisciplinary research to address major issues of relevance to both science and society. In addition, the Council actively advocates for freedom in the conduct of science, promotes equitable access to scientific data and information, and facilitates science education and capacity building.

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