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The Oceanographic Congress

A highly satisfactory chapter in the history of the AAAS came to an end on 11 September with the conclusion of the First International Oceanographic Congress. Over 1100 biologists, chemists, geologists, geophysicists, and other scientists spent two weeks in lively discussion of oceanographic research problems. Participants came from 54 different countries, with Canada, France, Japan, the U.S.S.R., the U.K., and the U.S. sending the largest delegations.

The program was organized around five topics: history of the oceans, populations of the sea, the deep sea, boundaries of the sea, and cycles of organic and inorganic substances in the sea. General sessions in the mornings and concurrent seminars in the afternoons were held in the excellent facilities of United Nations headquarters, which provided lecture and conference rooms, simultaneous interpretation, and an atmosphere of international cooperation that were ideal for such a meeting. In between sessions there were the usual opportunities for informal discussion, and the unusual opportunity to visit seven oceanographic research vessels from France, the Soviet Union, and the United States that were tied up at New York piers.

Planning for the meeting was prompted by the still evident stimulation to arid lands research given by the international conference on that topic that the AAAS and UNESCO held in New Mexico in 1955. Initial plans called for a somewhat similar meeting on oceanographic research, but correspondence with oceanographers from various parts of the world convinced the committee on arrangements that a full-scale international congress was desirable.

September of 1959 was a good time for such a meeting, for in the many months since plans began to be formulated, a wealth of International Geophysical Year information became available, the National Academy of Sciences brought out its comprehensive report on the necessity for a great expansion of oceanographic research, and plans for the spectacular effort to drill through the earth's crust to the Mohorovičić discontinuity began to take realistic shape. The fact that much of the earth's history is recorded in the layers at the bottom of the sea, the sheer size of the oceans, their fantastically varied fauna and flora, and their rapidly growing commercial and strategic importance all provide a rich variety of topics for report, discussion, and speculation.

The holding of international meetings is not a usual activity for the AAAS, nor can it be, but one of the functions of the Association is to facilitate cooperation among scientists. The congress did that. There is no organization that covers all fields of oceanographic interest, and never before has there been a meeting such as the one just concluded. The Board of Directors decided that the AAAS could contribute to the advancement of science by inviting representatives of all scientific disciplines interested in the oceans to get together to talk over their research problems. UNESCO and the Special Committee on Oceanic Research of the International Council of Scientific Unions agreed, and cosponsored the congress. Private foundations, federal agencies, and industry also agreed, and provided financial support. Mary Sears and her fellow members of the committee on arrangements have already been voted the enthusiastic thanks of the participants. They deserve also the thanks of the AAAS, for the congress they arranged was a successful contribution to the advancement of science.—D.W.

