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A New International Program

The term "scientific community" is often used in a context that implies effective organization, with unity of purpose and action. In general, the implication is far from fact. One discipline that is unusually cohesive is geophysics. This is true on a national scale; performance is particularly exemplary on the international level. To a major extent this behavior arises out of the needs of the discipline. The entire earth is a laboratory of geophysics, and projects often involve cooperation of scientists from many nations.

The largest scientific cooperative venture ever conducted, International Geophysical Year (IGY), involved 60,000 participants from 67 countries. Attracted by the success of IGY, other disciplines have attempted special international programs, but in general they have not come to much. Usually preparation was inadequate.

Geophysicists, together with geologists, are now in the process of launching a major new international project, and their procedures could well be studied by those having similar ambitions. The new venture, called the Geodynamics Project, is designed to exploit the many opportunities for new insights resulting from recent advances in earth science. It is now widely accepted that the crust of the earth consists of a limited number of tectonic plates (some of them continents) and that these are in motion. Their collisions give rise to earthquakes, volcanism, mountain-building, and other geological, geochemical, and geophysical phenomena.

Much of the original impetus for the program was supplied in 1968 by the Geophysics Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council. In the intervening years, thoroughgoing planning has been done for the major, active phase of the project, scheduled for 1974 through 1979. Chairman of both the U.S. Geodynamics Committee and the International Geodynamics Project is Charles Drake of Dartmouth. He has obtained the backing of seven of the major earth science societies and has enlisted the cooperation of industry, government, and academia. For example, each of the major universities was asked to nominate a correspondent who would serve as a contact between the project and his university. About 100 institutions named such a representative. In delineating activities for the program and in establishing priorities, the U.S. national committee set up 14 ad hoc working groups, which included about 140 leading, active scientists. These groups identified opportunities and priorities in their spheres of interest and prepared backup material. Subsequently, the total package was examined and reworked extensively in a 3-day session involving about 50 experts. The material was polished further and has now been published.* The report outlines a comprehensive field program ranging from the mid-Atlantic Ridge to the western Aleutians, and from the Arctic to Antarctica. It lists opportunities, objectives, and priorities for field and laboratory studies. Participants will include micropaleontologists, geochemists, geomagneticians, seismologists, and vertebrate paleontologists.

The program has stirred wide interest and enthusiasm among earth scientists. Especially notable have been four meetings in Latin America, including that in Mexico City, arranged in part by the members of the Geodynamics Committee. Stimulated by the program, the hemisphere's geophysicists have been working together as never before.

The Geodynamics Committee is now seeking official government blessing for the project and some modest additional financial support for geodynamics research. The committee and its associates have outlined an excellent program. Their efforts fully merit government recognition and support.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* *U.S. Program for the Geodynamics Project* (National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C., 1973).