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Global Change

For more than 150 years a major activity of geologists has been to elucidate the great episodes of global change that have been wrought by natural processes. Today the challenge has expanded, for humans have become agents for environmental degradation with effects comparable to, and in some instances more profound than, those of nature. In assessing what is happening and in formulating remedial measures, earth scientists will have at their disposal a great array of instrumentation, data storage, and computational capabilities. In addition, geologists are accustomed to engage in cooperative international efforts.

The vitality, broad capabilities, and enthusiasm for tasks ahead was showcased at the International Geological Congress held 9 to 19 July in Washington, D.C. About 5900 registrants from more than 80 countries attended the meeting. Presentations were made by scientists from more than 73 countries. Among them were geologists from Vietnam, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Yemen, and South Africa. All the Eastern Bloc countries sent representatives, including 207 from the Soviet Union. This was one of the few instances in which the Russians arrived as promised, and in which passport problems were largely nonexistent. The People's Republic of China sent 127. In the three decades previous to the 1980 and 1984 International Geological Congresses, the PRC was conspicuous by its absence.

A large number of activities were conducted in connection with the Congress, including field trips, committee meetings, short courses, and workshops. A major transfer of information occurred in 13 sessions involving 20 to 25 simultaneous 15-minute talks plus a total of about 650 posters. A feature worthy of copying by other scientific groups was a set of extended abstracts for each presentation: no abstract, no place on the program. There were about 3500 abstracts, and these occupied 1858 pages. The average length was more than 800 words. From these it is possible to gain an impression of the status of earth science in the respective countries. As might be expected, geologists of the Third World were preoccupied with applied studies, for example, those relating to fossil fuels and minerals. Presentations from the developed world touched on a wide variety of additional topics, including radioactive wastes, ground-water contamination, soil erosion, seismic tomography, continental deep drilling, high-pressure studies, isotope geochemistry, and comparative planetology. At one time, the typical geologist strolled to rock outcrops and with pick and hammer obtained a hand specimen. Examination with a hand lens followed. Today, the most advanced equipment of the physical sciences is employed as well as supercomputers. Storage of information in databases and extracting information from them are now effective aids to progress in earth science. Cooperation between biochemists and paleontologists using DNA techniques is producing new understanding of phylogenetic relationships between living and extinct taxa.

This was the 28th International Geological Congress. The first was held in Paris in 1878. The President of the current Congress was Charles Drake of Dartmouth, with Bruce Hanshaw of the U.S. Geological Survey as Secretary General. They were excellent organizers. The next Congress will be held in Japan in 1992 with the Japanese in charge. Collaborating closely with the successive congresses is the International Union of Geological Sciences. It serves to foster international cooperation in the years between and during the congresses. The current President of the IUGS is Umberto Cordani of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. In a speech to the Congress he surveyed the many current successful research activities of earth scientists. He also pointed to an expanded role for geoscience in cooperation with other sciences in a worldwide effort to achieve sustainable development. He further noted:

Damage to the environment and the many problems related to it are now a major worldwide concern. The challenges cut across the divides of national jurisdiction, and political decisions on the management of resources and land-use planning are crucial. Sustainable development will give rise to an unprecedented demand for information, advice, and technologies that only an integrated approach can satisfy. In many countries, the focus of the challenge ahead is shifting from protection and restoration to planning and prevention. Possible solutions to environmental issues are becoming more and more complex and dependent on the cooperation of a multitude of sectors—but first and foremost, that of science.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON