

(Translated from the French)

**Global Launch Event of the International Year of Planet Earth
held at UNESCO on 12 and 13 February 2008**

**Speech by Mr. Jean-Pierre Jouyet, French Minister of State with responsibility for
European Affairs, on behalf of the French Government**

Director-General,
Presidents,
Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is purely by chance, though by a happy coincidence, that I can join you here today: if the French President and the Minister for Higher Education and Research had not visited French Guiana, I would not have had the honour of participating today in the Global Launch Event of the first International Year of Planet Earth (IYPE) proposed by geoscience bodies and UNESCO and proclaimed by the United Nations on 22 December 2005.

The first International Year of Planet Earth results from collective awareness of the limits of our planet whose resources are gradually being depleted: a planet bled dry, worn out – if you'll pardon the expression – by a population of six and a half billion, soon to reach nine billion.

This awareness, which is now widely shared, including by the highest political authorities, stems from the work conducted by scientists and Earth specialists. They have discovered, raised, studied and announced in their full dimension the environmental problems we are facing today.

If our environment and our societies are to achieve sustainable and acceptable development, we can no longer afford to disregard the growing scarcity of mineral resources, the ultimate disappearance of fossil energies, the impoverishment of agricultural land, the issues of water quality and waste storage, and risks relating to uncontrolled regional planning.

Resolving environmental issues must become the driving force behind further growth, development in Third World countries, and reduction of inequalities.

An International Year is first and foremost a project we must sustain together. Over sixty countries to date have committed themselves to doing so. What better illustration is there of the strength of the awareness I just referred to and of the multiplying effect it has thanks to the scientific community.

If you will allow me to point out to you that all European countries have mobilized without exception, you will hence easily understand that Europe's rallying to this cause is of particular importance to me.

An International Year: what for? Above all to explain to the global community the challenges it must meet and their scientific scope, in order to enable public authorities to frame policy on this basis.

Scientists must be given greater place so as to allow informed decision-making. This is what France initiated during the Grenelle Environment Forum with the help of clarifications by scientists, and what Europe does by consulting experts as much as possible when framing public policymaking.

The geologists, geophysicists and geochemists studying the Earth and the upheavals that have occurred during its history for over four billion years must clearly play a central role.

That is the reason why France, which ascribes great importance to the social and cultural aspects of the International Year initiatives, has decided to call the IYPE the year of "geoscience in the service of humankind".

The Earth is subject to two constraints that cannot be avoided, whatever the more optimistic may say.

- The first of those relates to population growth. There are 6.5 billion of us today, a figure that is to rise to 9 billion in 2050 according to current projections, i.e. an increase of 3 billion people. They will need to feed themselves, consume geological resources and produce energy. They will increase land use and create more forms of pollution.

- The second constraint stems from climate change: in addition to the often highly perceptible natural cyclic variations in the Earth's temperature, one now has to contend with the impact of greenhouse gases that have been produced in great quantities by human activities since the Industrial Revolution. I wish to remind you that it is urgent to act collectively to fight climate change. In view of the responsibilities it holds and of its values, Europe must also show the way in this fight. It cannot take action alone, however. If our twenty-six European Union partners join the movement towards this, it will still be important for us to convince the other economies to rally to this urgent necessity. This will be one of the priorities of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union that is to start on 1 July of this year. European efforts, however, will need to be matched elsewhere. Should the ecological cost of sustainable development hamper European competitiveness in relation to that of its other partners, measures will need to be implemented to guarantee the sharing of the burden among all those who are to shoulder part of it given the level of development they have achieved.

We expect a great deal from researchers, geoscientists in particular, with a view to their helping make the Earth a better place to live. What role could planet sciences play in this context? We need to stick to the foundations of the approach chosen by geologists, namely to

- prospect to find new mineral resources;
- monitor changes in natural environments;
- understand and anticipate the Planet's reactions in response to human activities;
- propose alternative solutions in terms of energy resources and storage of increasing waste volumes;
- continue to act as whistle-blowers, who must be heard and listened to by government policymakers.

The IYPE should therefore help raise the awareness of our authorities and populations about the urgency of gaining knowledge, about being informed to be able to take action.

A number of series of scientific meetings will enable a joint assessment of the situation throughout 2008 and help take stock of the best research successes, notably in geoscience research.

I would also like the International Year to witness a special effort towards the youth of the world. We owe it to them to teach them about this issue since we are, after all, definitely accountable for the world we will pass on to them.

Some explaining is needed, since only by understanding how their behaviours interact with their environment will they be able to adopt, by themselves and durably, the reflexes we ourselves find so difficult to make our own.

I believe that raising awareness about science subjects, geoscience in particular, is a way of investing in the future of sustainable development. In addition, the French authorities are actively prompting French students to choose science subjects, geoscience in particular.

Before concluding, I would like to recall that the French government is strongly committed to turning development into a sustainable reality. As I said, Europe has set itself particularly ambitious objectives for protecting our environment. Europe can achieve credibility in this respect only if France is itself exemplary. Likewise, Europe will be convincing only insofar as it abides by its own commitments.

Scientific truth alone will make it possible to view situations objectively and overcome wariness and dangerous trends. These sometimes occur under cover of pseudo-scientific truth that fuels fear and hides behind the precautionary principle. All that is reduced to nil when it stands the test of the researcher community's intellectual rigour.

Challenges ahead are so great that we cannot afford to exhaust ourselves in quibbling. I trust in your ability to work together to support this shared diagnosis as an imperative precondition for public policymaking and action on the part of women and men.

Action that must take place on the scale of our Planet, hence the importance of this initiative by the United Nations and UNESCO and of the Paris Declaration you are to make at the end of this meeting.

Thank you for your attention.