This March, 50,000 people from 60 nations embark on a truly inspirational international scientific programme. The Natural Environment Research Council is providing the funding for the international programme offices, based at the British Antarctic Survey, to coordinate and manage this ambitious programme.

More information
www.ipy.org

Why International Polar Year? And why now? IPY director, **Dave Carlson**, explains what makes IPY so special.

The International Polar Year (IPY) has drawn extraordinary interest from scientists of many specialties and many nationalities. A cautious assessment prior to the start shows more than 200 international projects, addressing a wide range of physical, biological and social research topics in polar regions. With thousands of scientists, and including students, engineers, technicians and other support staff so essential to polar research, IPY will involve approximately 50,000 people from at least 60 nations. Ten nations have allocated new funds for IPY; several others will follow. With this new funding added to large amounts of existing national research funds, and with these thousands of participants, IPY will represent the largest coordinated international scientific effort in 50 years.

Why such strong interest, out of proportion to any hoped-for new funding? Many IPY participants respond strongly to two primary motivations: because IPY addresses crucial issues at a critical time, and because IPY represents a chance to build a very special programme. Recent scientific reports, and their rapid dissemination by the popular press, bring abundant evidence of crucial issues: glaciers and ice sheets melting at increasing rates; hints of changes in the circulation of deep cold ocean waters; changes in permafrost and polar vegetation; increased threats to food security in northern communities. In terms of public attention to these issues, IPY could not happen at a better time.

What will make IPY special, apart from size or overall cost? IPY responds to urgent issues; it represents a global scientific effort conducted within the context of global climate change. Unlike previous international science years, including the International Geophysical Year of 1957 and 1958 that played a powerful role in creating the agreements, the practices and the institutions that support science today, IPY 2007-2008 will include cooperation and collaboration across a broad range of biological, social and geophysical scientific specialties, from geneticists to glaciologists and from anthropologists to astronomers. The urgency and complexity of changes in polar regions demand such a broad and integrated scientific approach.

These new collaborations and coalitions will stimulate new data access and exchange practices, new academic courses, and new forms and forums for scientific discourse. The post-IPY scientific community will recognise new strengths and new capabilities to apply to future global scientific challenges. Meanwhile, against a background of prominent films, television series, museum exhibitions, and regular broadcast coverage, many institutions and individual schools and teachers will organise local events, prepare new educational materials, and focus on new public engagement strategies. In its total science and outreach effort IPY will represent a large step forward in making science available and accessible to the general public.

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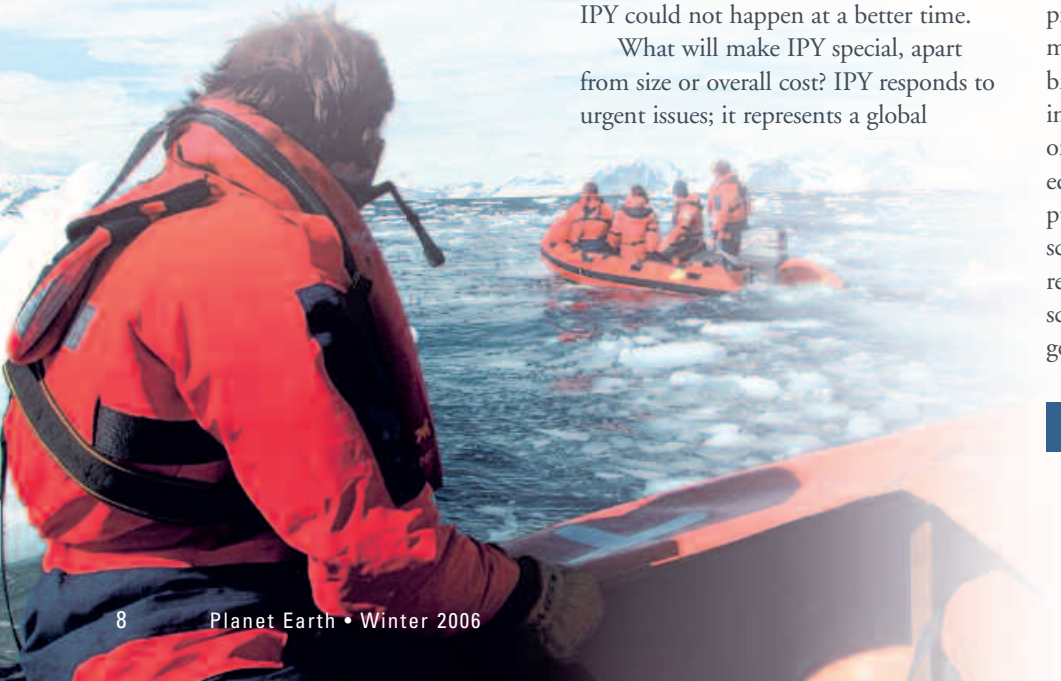
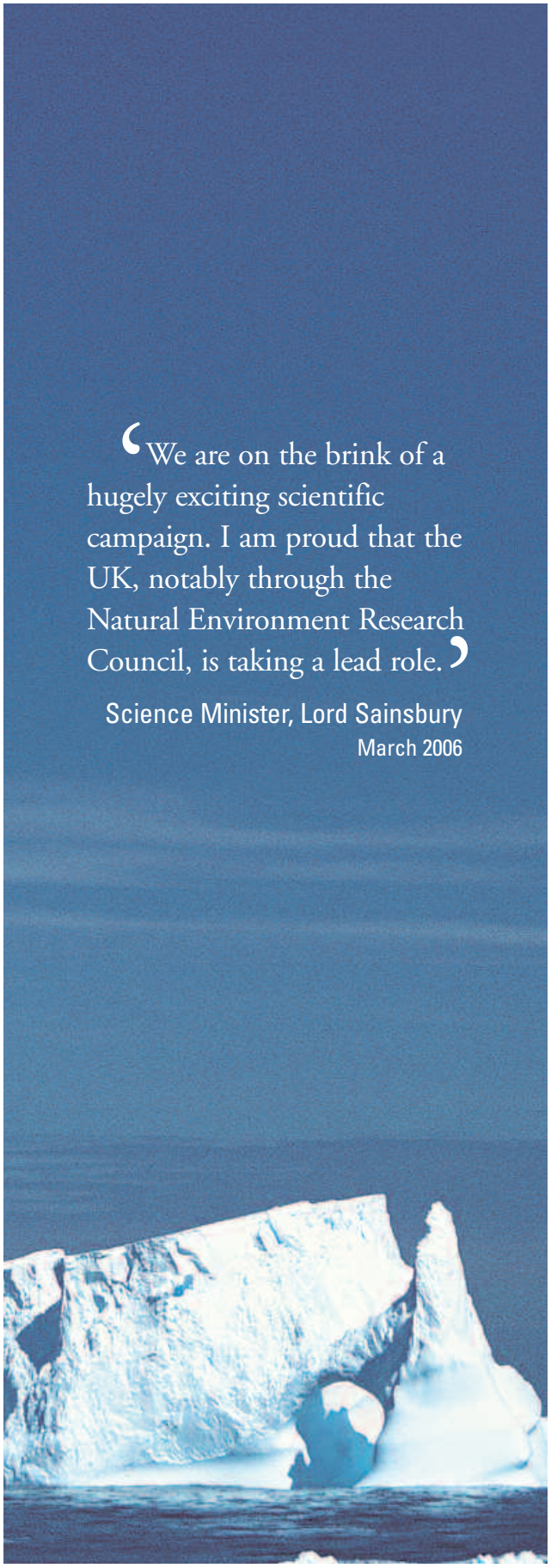


IPY is sponsored by the



"We are on the brink of a hugely exciting scientific campaign. I am proud that the UK, notably through the Natural Environment Research Council, is taking a lead role."

Science Minister, Lord Sainsbury
March 2006

Icebreakers and kayaks

"Many IPY projects will be international collaborations requiring a great deal of organisation, many staff and much equipment – the big icebreakers. But we have also been careful to approve much smaller projects too – the kayaks. And we really have no idea what kind of scientific breakthroughs these smaller projects will produce, which makes them so exciting."

Dave Carlson

The IPY office have already approved over 200 Arctic, Antarctic and bi-polar projects. See the IPY honeycomb for a full breakdown of all the projects and how they fit together. www.ipy.org

History of International Polar Year

IPY 1 1882-1883

Researchers and academics acknowledged that polar exploration was best done through a coordinated international effort. Twelve countries joined together on 15 expeditions to the poles.

IPY 2 1932-1933

The World Meteorological Organization proposed the second IPY to investigate the global implications of the newly discovered jet stream. The second IPY led to 40 permanent observation stations in the Arctic.

IPY 3 1957-1958

The third IPY snowballed into the International Geophysical Year and became a simply stunning year for the scientific community. Researchers discussed the theory of continental drift and plate tectonics, they made the first measurements of the thickness of the Antarctic ice sheet and so were able to estimate how much of the planet's freshwater is locked up in the ice. Scientists discovered the Van Allen Radiation Belt. The world's first satellites were launched and the spirit of cooperation led to the ratification of the Antarctic Treaty in 1961 and the first truly international territory.

The year saw the start of long-term measurements of atmospheric ozone above Antarctica, which led to the discovery of the ozone hole by British Antarctic Survey scientists in 1985.

International Council of Science (ICSU) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO)