

International Polar Year—A Statement by the United Nations Environment Programme

March 2007-- The International Polar Year (IPY) is underway. Extending over two years from March 2007 to March 2009, it will be the largest ever international research programme in the polar regions. Its primary focus is on the over-arching issue facing us all—namely climate change and interactions of climate, oceans, ice, land, ecosystems and human society in the Arctic and Antarctic.

This International Polar Year is the 125th anniversary of the first IPY, the 75th anniversary of the second IPY and the 50th anniversary of the International Geophysical Year. All of these were major initiatives that brought new insights into polar and global processes, developed new methods and advanced international cooperation in polar research. The trend in science towards more multidisciplinary and ecosystem approaches makes that this is the first of the IPYs to include research on the Earth's natural systems and on human societies.

IPY has been in the planning stages for several years with unprecedented efforts to bring scientists from many disciplines together and to form partnerships with educators, communicators and community leaders.

The research being undertaken through IPY is critical. The global community needs to understand how the polar regions are connected to the global ocean and climate systems – we need to know how fast the sea level is going to rise and how the melting permafrost will change the world's carbon balance.

Rapid changes are occurring in the polar regions and these changes are intertwined with and impacting the rest of the world. Critical interlinked changes include shrinking sea ice, thawing of permafrost and glaciers, changes in polar ocean salinity and marine and terrestrial temperatures and shifts in distribution and reductions in abundance of migratory species and accelerating rates of industrial development, especially related to exploitation of Arctic petroleum reserves.

Complementary to its research agenda, IPY has an extensive education and outreach programme – polar conferences, books, films, web sites, cultural events and school programmes are planned around the world

UNEP is working to help make IPY a successful global event. UNEP's special focus during IPY is to increase awareness around the world about polar issues and about the importance of the changes happening in the polar regions.

UNEP has chosen the theme 'Melting Ice – a Hot Topic?' for World Environment Day (WED) this year. UNEP will launch an assessment report, the Global Outlook for Ice and Snow, at WED on June 5 in Tromsø, Norway and around the world. This assessment, written by leading scientists from institutes around the world, will present an overview of what is known at the outset of IPY about the current situation with ice and snow and will

look at the impacts of the changes going on now and those projected for this century. Arctic sea ice, the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets, mountain glaciers around the world, trends in snow cover, impacts of rising sea levels – these are a few of the topics covered.

In addition, UNEP is working with several IPY projects and through data and outreach committees to help IPY initiatives to reach global audiences and leave a legacy of increased understanding of the polar regions. UNEP is partnering with the Tara Arctic drift expedition, based on a sailing ship drifting with the pack ice in the Arctic Ocean and used as a base for studying changes in the Arctic sea ice, atmosphere and ocean. The Tara's scientific programme is part of the European consortium DAMOCLES, a major IPY European programme that involves more than 45 laboratories and institutes around the world.

More information on IPY and how to get involved:

IPY is sponsored by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the International Council for Science (ICSU), with international governance through an International Joint Committee. IPY funding for research, education and outreach activities is through participating national governments or other donors. Information on IPY and how to get involved is found at www.ipy.org. Questions about UNEP's involvement in IPY can be addressed to Joan Eamer, Polar Programme Manager, UNEP/GRID-Arendal, Norway, E-mail: Joan.Eamer@grida.no, Tel: +47 99 42 96 18.