

The Earth in focus

Nature Geoscience launches at the beginning of the United Nations International Year of Planet Earth 2008, subtitled 'Earth sciences for society'. We applaud this theme, but cast our net wider.

Despite all attempts of modern civilization to be independent from the natural world, Earth is claiming its place in the limelight time and again. Media reports on natural disasters — hurricanes, floods, tsunamis or earthquakes — or on scarcities in the supply of vital resources like food and water, metals and minerals, or gas and oil reach us almost every day. Indeed, the first *Nature Geoscience* papers, published through advance online publication from early December, have already hit the headlines. In a warming world, the climate sciences have been transformed from the niche branch of the atmospheric sciences that they were just 30 years ago to a fast-expanding area of research with — some argue — more public attention than is good for the science.

More and more people around the world would like to learn about the past, present and future of our planet. In recognition of the rising interest in the geosciences, the United Nations have declared 2008 as the International Year of Planet Earth. The aim of this focus on our planet is to raise "worldwide public and political awareness of the vast (but often

under-used) potential of Earth sciences for improving the quality of life and safeguarding the planet".

Nature Geoscience supports the goals of the International Year of Planet Earth. In this issue, the links between the earth sciences and society are central to the Commentary on the future of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change, giving testimony to the demands society places on science. The impacts on our quality of life and concern for the planet's future probably also motivated the research on earthquake recurrence along the San Andreas Fault as well as on the climatic expansion of the tropical belt.

But *Nature Geoscience* will go beyond research that may ultimately help to preserve lives and property. The Earth deserves study simply to satisfy our curiosity about all facets of our home planet. We will not see the sky as our limit either. Advances in planetary science, often informed by and informative for processes on Earth, are most welcome in our pages. In this month's research section, we are proud to present science spanning the Earth's core, oceans, glaciers and the stratosphere,

chemistry, physics and biology, and field work as well as modelling.

In order to celebrate the passion and endurance that geoscientists bring to their work, we are highlighting the 'backstory' to selected research articles each month, in the form of a question-and-answer piece at the back of the journal or on our website. Here, geoscientists tell the story of their research before it was written up neatly in a paper: we learn about the commute to work by helicopter in the high Arctic, about military protection for mapping the floor of the Arabian Sea, and about a black bear climbing easily up an Alaskan glacier moraine that was such a struggle to the scientist, to name just a few examples from this issue. Because earth scientists like to know exactly where a story is set, each backstory shows the globe from a different perspective, centred on the location of the field work.

We at *Nature Geoscience* anticipate exciting years ahead, when undoubtedly much will be learned about the Earth and its neighbouring planets. We are looking forward to participating in this endeavour with the planetary and geoscience community.

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