

DIGGING DEEP

Origins of the International Geological Congress

The four-year-long wait for the ‘world cup of geoscientific conferences’, the International Geological Congress, is finally over, with the much-anticipated thirty-fifth session of the event set to start on August 27 in Cape Town.

Given that 138 years have lapsed since the first congress was held in Paris in 1878, it is worthwhile recapping the origins of this most prestigious of scientific events.

When the idea of hosting an international geological conference was first mooted, geology was still a fairly young discipline.

In fact, **James Hutton**’s paper, ‘Theory of the Earth’, which is widely regarded as having established geology as a proper science, had been presented to the Royal Society of Edinburgh less than a century earlier. (Interestingly, it is for this work, published in 1795, that Hutton is often referred to as the Father of Modern Geology.)

Moreover, the oldest national geological body in the world, the Royal Geological Society of London, was only formed in October 1807.

In those premodern-telecommunications days, scientific ideas were slow to spread, so the discipline developed at varying paces and, often, according to different principles and practices. And, given the disparate nature of the world in the nineteenth century, foreign ideas and debate, whether sound or not, were not always heeded by the different scientific bodies. It is for these reasons that, by the time the 1870s dawned, there was little uniformity in geological mapping or nomenclature.

Being aware that this would inhibit the progress of the discipline, Spanish geologist and professor at the University of Madrid **Juan Vilanova y Piera** pioneered efforts to standardise terminology. In 1867, he urged



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the Geological Society of France to organise an international event to discuss that issue. His efforts met with no success and the baton passed to Italian geologist and professor at the University of Bologna **Giovanni Capellini**, who

tried, also unsuccessfully, to convene a similar meeting in Italy in 1874.

Given the failures of the Europeans, it fell to the Americans to get the initiative off the ground.

On the back of the success of the International Exhibition of 1876, an art, science and industry-related extravaganza hosted in Philadelphia, a group of geologists under the umbrella of the American Association for the Advancement of Science decided to use the next world fair as a platform for progressing that field of study.

On August 25, 1876, members of that organisation unanimously adopted a resolution that read: “That a committee of the association be appointed by the chair to consider the propriety of holding an international congress of geologists at