UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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Director-General
of the
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco)

at the opening of the 25th
International Geographical Congress

Paris, 27 August 1984
Mr Chairman,
Mr Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I should like to say what a great pleasure it is for me to be amongst you today at the opening of this 25th International Geographical Congress. I should like to thank the Chairman of the Congress's International Organizing Committee, Professor Journaux, for inviting me to speak at this meeting. I should also like to greet the Chairman of this meeting, Mr Jean-Pierre Chevènement, the French Minister of Education, Mrs Arveiller, Chancellor of the Universities of Paris, the distinguished persons representing the five host countries of the Congress, namely France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, Italy and Switzerland, and all those attending the Congress.

I must also tell you what emotion I feel when speaking in this amphitheatre to an audience among whom I can see some of my former teachers who introduced me to the study of geography in this very place thirty-five years ago, as well as some of my fellow pupils or former colleagues who honour the study of geography by the quality of their work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of man's greatest concerns is undoubtedly to acquire a knowledge of his natural environment - to observe the special characteristics of the surrounding flora and fauna and of the different natural phenomena - in order to discover those laws which he needs to know if he is to survive and carry on his activities.

For a long time, his knowledge was inevitably limited to the relatively small area where his natural community evolved, but with the development of man's faculties, the increase in his capacities for organization and the growth of relations between peoples and between different regions, he came to realize that natural phenomena extended far beyond political or cultural frontiers and that they needed to be examined on a vast scale, by combining observations made at ever more widely-spread points on the globe. It is chiefly to geographers that we owe our vision of the planet as a whole, whose main phenomena and certain of whose problems can only be fully examined by studying the many different places where they occur and by studying the way they interact throughout the world.

Thus the very nature of its subject-matter has obliged geography to adopt an approach, viz. the establishment of links between what is specific and what is general, between what is local and what is worldwide - which has, in its turn, been extremely fruitful where other disciplines are concerned.

At the same time, geography has developed a capacity for amalgamation at the interface of various fields of science. In seeking to understand all the complexities of the interactions that occur between man and his environment, geography has tended to play a key role at the point where the natural sciences and the social and human sciences meet. It has thus opened the way for a multidisciplinary approach, which has proved to be more and more vital for the progress of all modern knowledge.
This worldwide interdisciplinary approach to problems, which makes geographical research a particularly favourable area for international co-operation, is the foundation on which the necessary contact between Unesco and the worldwide community of geographers repose.

Unesco was in fact created 'for the purpose of advancing, through the educational and scientific and cultural relations of the peoples of the world, the objectives of international peace and of the common welfare of mankind...'.

This assumes that man can live and prosper through the rational management of his environment. It was in furtherance of this aim that it was decided to establish Major Programme X of Unesco's second Medium-Term Plan for 1984-1989 on 'The human environment and terrestrial and marine resources' - in whose activities we welcome the participation of many geographers.

Within this framework, programmes are being devoted to the earth's crust and to mineral and energy resources, water resources, the ocean and its resources, coastal and island regions, the resources of terrestrial ecosystems, land-use planning, and the protection of the natural heritage.

Unesco's main international scientific programmes, providing the central framework for its activity in all the above-mentioned fields, are, as you know, the International Geological Co-operation Programme (IGCP), the International Hydrological Programme (IHP), the Programme on Man and the Biosphere (MAB) and the programmes of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC).

Unesco has long-established, close and mutually advantageous co-operative links with the International Geographical Union in all fields that form part of the Union's activities. This is an ideal opportunity for me to say how gratified I am by this.

In recent years, this collaboration has developed mainly through the IGU's commissions and working groups which deal with matters connected with the Organization's programmes, such as the Commission on Geographical Education, the thematic Commissions on Environmental Problems, on Mountain Geocology and on Resource Management of the Drylands, whose work is more especially linked with the MAB programme.

I also commend the work of the IUG's specific Commission which maintains contact with IHP. Other commissions, such as the Commission of Cartography of the Dynamic Environment, are of relevance to all Unesco's environmental science programmes.

Mr Chairman,

Over the centuries, geographers have often played a leading role in establishing new links between regions that had previously known nothing of each other, in the mutual discovery of peoples and in bringing the different cultures closer together.

In a world now unified, although beset by grave threats, and possessing the means of rationally managing the earth's resources for the good of all its peoples - as well as the means of destroying them - geographers can strengthen the ties of understanding - now more necessary than ever - between nations and between people. Bound together by a worldwide discipline, by a chain of experiences and work common to them, they represent a token of progress, solidarity and peace as a tormented period in the history of mankind.
The aim of your Congress is to strengthen this chain by encouraging new advances in geography and by further extending international scientific co-operation. I therefore, earnestly wish it every success.