



A Brief History of IAH

This account is adapted from a more detailed article written by John Day and published in the first edition of Applied Hydrogeology, now the Hydrogeology Journal.

A brief history of the IAH

In 1996 the International Association of Hydrogeologists reached its 40th birthday by which time it had held 26 Congresses. It has an individual and corporate membership of around 3800, drawn from up to 135 countries throughout the world.

Early difficulties

Yet this was not always so. From small beginnings, and by its members' persistent exertions, the Association has achieved a truly international stature and a professional reputation second to none, motivated only by its members' desires to get to know each other and to share professional expertise despite the various political and economic barriers of the times. Make no mistake, 40 years ago, those barriers were all too real, as many older members of the Association remember only too clearly. The aftermath of the Second World War, the virtual breakdown of relations between the countries of Eastern Europe and the West, together with the isolation of huge areas of Asia, created enormous problems for international science.

The beginning

How then, did it all start? Maybe those who were there at the time have slightly differing recollections, but the late Steve Buchan (Past President, 1972-1977) told me that he held initial discussions with George Drouhin as early as 1948, during a hydrogeological excursion of the 18th International Geological Congress (IGC) meeting in London. These, and later talks led to the formation of a provisional committee under Drouhin's chairmanship at the next IGC meeting in Algiers in 1952. This, in turn, led to the formal constitution of IAH at the 1956 IGC meeting in Mexico City. In 1964, the Association was affiliated to the International Union of Geological Sciences.

IAH held its first Congress in Paris in 1957. These are now held annually. The most recent, the 28th Congress, was held in Las Vegas. The programme is already full until 2003. In addition to these congresses, the Association holds or co-sponsors many meetings each year through its National Committees or with sister international organisations, and many of these produce their own, separate publications.

Commissions

IAH promotes the study of special topics through Working Groups and Commissions. The earliest, and probably the best-known Commission, that for hydrogeological maps, was established in 1959 under the chairmanship of the late Professor Herbert Karrenberg, and, more recently, of Willi Struckmeier. This Commission has now effectively completed its main task - the making of a 30-sheet hydrogeological map of Europe at a scale of 1:1.5 million, to an agreed legend and format.

Most recently, The Burdon Commission has been established to support and encourage the development of hydrogeology and the solution of hydrogeological

problems of developing countries. Many practical difficulties face this Commission which is, arguably, potentially the most important ever created by IAH; it has a daunting task and slim resources, its main assets are the energy, enthusiasm, expertise, and experience of its members. Indeed, the same might well apply to most IAH Commissions.

New developments

It had long been the ambition of the Association to produce its own Journal to complement the International Contributions to Hydrogeology Series. This ambition came to fruition in 1992 in collaboration with the Heise Company. The Hydrogeology Journal is now distributed to all members as part of the benefits of the subscription fee. Wider recognition for the Journal has come from the decision of the Geological Society of America to co-sponsor Hydrogeology Journal.

All these member services cost money, and although IAH believes that it gives exceptional value for money to its members there is, of course, the continuing financial problem of the payment of fees by members in soft-currency and low income countries. Conscious of the disparity in professional salaries between developed and developing nations, IAH has introduced a two tier membership fee. For those for whom even a reduced fee is beyond reach, IAH introduced in 1989, a voluntary sponsorship scheme, over 130 of such members already benefit from this scheme which has potential to grow further.

To support these various initiatives, and as a sign of growing maturity as an organisation, since 1993 IAH has maintained a permanent secretariat with a part-time professional staff to improve the efficiency of its services to members and to help IAH sustain its continued fast growth in membership and activities.

The future

What of the future? The challenges presented by the need to sustain and protect the world's groundwater resources are enormous and there is much to be gained by sharing our experiences, not only among groundwater professionals but also among decision makers and the general public who can influence the future of our vital water resources. We can expect that the members of IAH will play leading parts in the continuing location, assessment, development, management, and protection of the groundwater resources of both industrialised and developing nations, resources so vital to their economic and social health. More people means more consumption, means more potential pollution, means greater efforts to prevent it.

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