Geoscience, Culture and Adventure: My 37th IGC Experience and Journey Through South Korea

Written by Renzo Ocampo, Early-career Geologist and Australian Delegate at the 37th International Geological Congress (25-31 August 2024)

The 37th International Geological Congress (IGC) in Busan, South Korea, was a landmark event for geoscientists across the globe, often referred to as the "Olympic Games of Geoscience" due to its significance and the fact that it happens only every four years. The congress brought together industry leaders, researchers and professionals to exchange ideas, explore the latest innovations and collaborate on solving pressing global issues. The theme for the 2024 IGC, "The Great Travelers: Voyages to the Unifying Earth", underscored the vital role of geoscientists in exploring the unknown and addressing complex challenges. As one of the most prestigious gatherings in the geoscience community, the IGC provided a unique platform to discuss the future of earth sciences, with a particular focus on education, sustainability and evolving challenges. For me, the congress was not only an opportunity to deepen my knowledge but also to forge connections with geoscientists and leading experts from around the world.

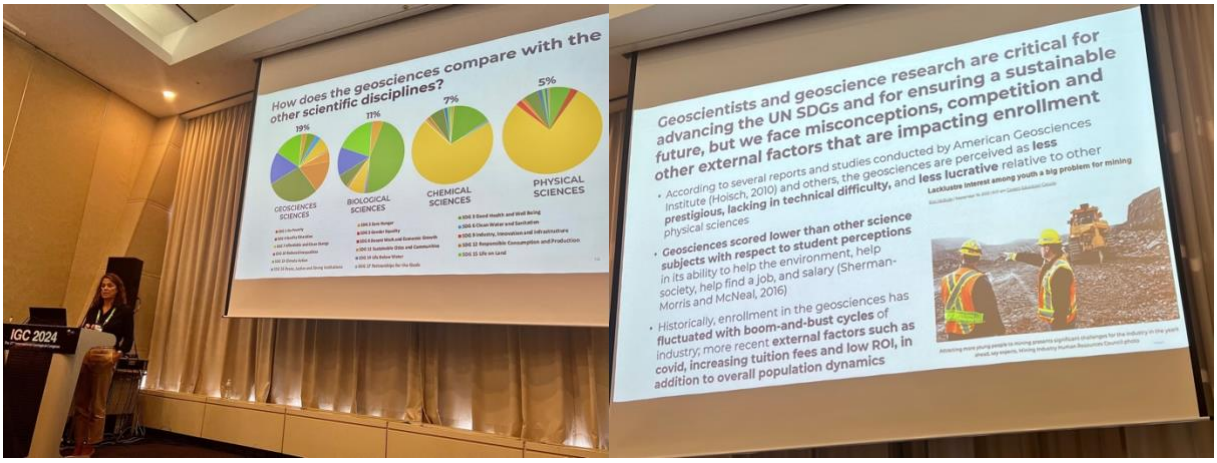
BEXCO (Busan Exhibition & Convention Center) hosted the 37th IGC, bringing the world's geoscientists to Busan.

Australian delegates came together at the 37th IGC in South Korea, connecting early-career geoscientists from across the nation.

A standout session I attended was on "International Perspectives on Earth Science Education", which addressed the global trend of declining student numbers in earth sciences. It was eye-opening to learn that this issue extends beyond Australia, affecting institutions globally. My personal discussions with representatives from the Geological Society of America, the Geological Society of London and the American Geosciences Institute were particularly enlightening, offering strategies to reignite interest in geosciences through education and outreach. As someone who holds leadership roles within AIG Next Gen Geos and the AusIMM Geoscience Society, I've actively contributed to initiatives such as organising geological field trips and networking events, and volunteering in several high school and university outreach programs across Australia. Engaging with these international representatives sparked meaningful conversations about potential collaborations to strengthen our collective efforts in supporting the future generation of geoscientists.

Renzo Ocampo and Jenna McGovern met with representatives from the Geological Society of America and Geological Society of London, exploring potential collaborations to support the next generation of geoscientists.

Additionally, I was captivated by Phoebe McMellon's presentation (CEO of GeoscienceWorld), which addressed misconceptions impacting the number of future geoscientists. She pointed out that geosciences are often perceived as less prestigious, less technically challenging and less lucrative. Other factors affecting enrolment include the industry's boom-and-bust cycles, rising tuition fees and low returns on investment (ROI). McMellon also noted that poor public perception, influenced by the field's association with extractive industries and limited exposure in school curriculum, contributes to the decline. Her insights underscored the need to change the narrative and public perception of Earth Science. By inspiring the next generation to consider careers in the geoscience and advancing our understanding of Earth through funding geoscience research and outreach programs, we can ensure a more sustainable future.



Phoebe McMellon presented at the 'International Perspectives on Earth Science Education' session, addressing key challenges and strategies for revitalising interest in geosciences.

The congress featured a diverse range of sessions on topics such as space exploration, tectonics and economic geology, among others. Beyond the technical discussions, I reconnected with my professor and PhD students from the University of Adelaide and had a chance to make new friendships and valuable connections with geologists and industry professionals from around the globe. Walking through the exhibition floor, I talked to exhibitors showcasing cutting-edge innovations and the latest tools and technologies. A memorable event was the 2028 Melbourne Bid Reception, where I had the honour of meeting Jeff Robinson, the Australian Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, and I even served as one of the event photographers. Although Canada won the bid to host the 38th IGC in Calgary in 2028, the passion and dedication of the Melbourne bid team were truly inspiring. Their commitment to delivering a high-quality bid was commendable, and I extend my congratulations to them for their outstanding effort. I am excited about the future of geoscience gatherings and look forward to the next IGC in Calgary.

Australasian Bid Committee and volunteers at BEXCO, showcasing their dedication and teamwork.

Renzo and Jenna McGovern with Ambassador Jeff Robinson and David Cohen at the Australasian bid reception event.

Cultural artists and musicians from all three 2028 bid teams united to celebrate inclusivity and diversity at the IGC. Sean Candy's spectacular didgeridoo performance was a standout moment.

Beyond the academic sessions, I had the opportunity to indulge in the cultural festivities. Korean Night was another unforgettable part of the congress, providing a chance to sample traditional Korean food and immerse myself in the rich culture of the country through an incredible line-up of K-pop performances, taekwondo displays, and interpretive dance. While the Young Scientists Party on the final day of the IGC was a lively celebration along with IGC delegates, and it was a joyful way to close out the week and reflect on the successful connections and knowledge shared during the event.

Captivating performances during the IGC Korean Night Dinner, showcasing vibrant cultural artistry and tradition.

During my time in Busan, I explored the city's natural beauty and vibrant culture. Songdo Beach, with its pristine shoreline, was the perfect place to unwind, while the Songdo Cable Car ride to Songdo Sky Park offered breathtaking views of the vast sea, cargo ships and Busan's cityscape. Walking through the colourful streets of Gamcheon Culture Village with geoscientists from the USA was an immersive cultural experience, and a visit to Haeundae Beach, complete with its bustling night market, gave me a true taste of Korea's local street food culture. The day ended with karaoke night with my friends, reflecting the city's energetic nightlife.

Views from Songdo Sky Park and the Cable Car.

Views from Songdo Beach and the Shinsegae Centum City Rooftop.

Exploring Gamcheon Culture Village with American delegates.

Before the congress, I had a brief but memorable stay in Seoul, South Korea's vibrant capital. My first stop was Paradise City at Incheon, a striking blend of modern art and luxury. Subsequently, a cable car ride to Namsan Tower revealed breathtaking night views of Seoul, illuminated by thousands of lights. The Myeongdong Night Market was a haven for food lovers, where I indulged in local delicacies like spicy tteokbokki and sweet hoddeok. Another highlight was a visit to Gyeongbokgung Palace, where I was captivated by the grandeur of traditional Hanbok-wearing visitors. At the National Palace Museum, I learned about the rich history of Korean monarchy. My journey continued to the famous Gangnam district, where I saw the iconic Gangnam Style statue and modern attractions like the Starfield Library. I then moved to Marinabay Hotel, from where I had the chance to watch the beautiful sunset at the Ara Marina, rounding out my pre-congress journey through this fascinating city.

Experiencing the grandeur of Gyeongbokgung Palace.

Stunning views of the Namsan Seoul Tower, and the Yongsan District from the Cable Car.

Night view of the shimmering Seoul from the N Seoul Tower viewing platform.

Delicious Korean street food and the bustling energy of Myeongdong Night Market.

Gangnam District and the architectural marvel of Starfield Library.

On my way back to Australia, I embarked on a post-congress trip to Jeju Island, a UNESCO Global Geopark famed for its geological wonders. Though my initial plan to visit the Manjanggul Lava Cave was canceled by unexpected construction, a kind taxi driver took me on a scenic coastal drive for about two-hour journey. I then took a ferry to Udo Island, a volcanic island off Jeju's eastern coast. Exploring Udo by electric bike was exhilarating—its ancient caves and boulder-size volcanic rock were geological marvels. The island's gently sloping terrain and unique geological formations offered a rare glimpse into the forces that shaped it millions of years ago.

Udo Island with a distant view of Seongsan Ilchulbong, and boulder-sized igneous rocks along the coastline.

Back on Jeju, I visited Seongsan Ilchulbong (Sunrise Peak), a spectacular crater formed by a hydrovolcanic eruption over 5,000 years ago. The steep walls of the rugged, bowl-shaped crater rising above the ocean were awe-inspiring. One of the most memorable moments came as I boarded my flight home. The view of Mt. Hallasan, South Korea's highest peak, rising above the clouds, was a fitting final memory of Jeju Island. Its volcanic formations, with their lava tubes and tuff cones, were a testament to the island's ancient geologic past.

Seongsan Ilchulbong (Sunrise Peak) showcasing its stunning crater, a hidden gem offering breathtaking views and natural beauty.

Panoramic view of Sunrise Peak, highlighting its striking geological features such as beddings and fold structures.

Distant view of Mt. Hallasan, South Korea's highest peak, from Jeju City and aboard the plane.

Reflecting on my journey, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to attend the 37th IGC in Busan and explore the wonders of South Korea. This experience not only provided me with insights into diverse geoscience topics but also allowed me to witness firsthand the geological significance of this remarkable country. It was also my first solo international travel after living in Australia for more than a decade, and it was truly amazing to immerse myself in a different culture and expand my global connections. None of this would have been possible without the generous support of the Australian Geoscience Council (AGC), the Australian Academy of Science (AAS) and the Geological Society of Australia (GSA).