IOC Circular Letter No. 2333
(Available only in English)

To: IOC Action Addresses

To: Permanent Delegations to UNESCO

Cc: IODE National Coordinators for Oceanographic Data Management
IODE National Coordinators for Marine Information Management
Members of the OBIS Governing Board
Members of the OBIS Managers Committee

Subject: ESTABLISHMENT OF A MULTISOURCE TRUST FUND FOR THE SUPPORT OF THE OCEAN BIOGEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEM (OBIS)

For nearly a decade, through the Census of Marine Life (CoML), scientists have been collaborating to assess the diversity of marine life throughout the world’s oceans. The Ocean Biogeographic Information System (OBIS) is the data integration component of the CoML and has become the largest marine biodiversity database in the world. During the first ten years of its existence OBIS has been substantially supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, however this funding ends in 2010.

From the early years of the IOC fifty years ago, the IODE (International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange) Programme of the IOC has developed into a global network of National Oceanographic Data Centres (NODCs). Although the objective of IODE has been to encompass all marine data, most NODCs have focused more on physical and chemical data, and less on biological and biogeographical data. To address this issue IODE recommended the establishment of the “IODE Group of Experts on Biological and Chemical Data Management and Exchange Practices (GE-BICH)” (Recommendation IODE-XVI.4) in November 2000, which was subsequently approved by the twenty-first Session of the IOC Assembly (Resolution XXI-8). The terms of reference of the GE-BICH included cooperation with OBIS.

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Bearing in mind the importance of OBIS and the risk of its termination due to lack of continued support, the IOC Executive Secretary made an offer to the OBIS Governing Board (at its meeting in Rome, 28–29 April 2008), to explore an institutional intergovernmental framework for the continuation of OBIS. The Board agreed and a proposal was brought before the IOC Executive Council at its 41st Session (24 June–2 July 2008), and subsequently the twenty-fifth Session of the IOC Assembly (2009) decided to adopt OBIS within the IODE Programme (Resolution XXV-4).

The adoption of OBIS by IOC/IODE is an important and symbolic milestone for the IOC arriving at the time of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Commission.

However, the addition of a substantive activity like OBIS brings with it considerable responsibility and cost. Taking into consideration that a replacement must be found for the annual funding of $500,000, previously received from the Sloan Foundation and that the budget from the UNESCO Regular Programme is not increasing and that it will be necessary to mobilize extra-budgetary funding for the continued operation of the OBIS programme Resolution XXV-4 requested the IOC Executive Secretary “to set up a multi-source fund within the IOC Trust Fund for the support of OBIS and to keep the IOC Member States fully informed of the commitments made and the adequacy of the resources available”. In addition the Assembly requested the IOC Executive Secretary “to take the necessary actions for the creation of an extra-budgetary OBIS Programme Officer position...” The resolution also recognized the importance of biodiversity data to related UNESCO programmes and to the Strategy for Action on Climate Change. In addition, the IOC will be taking responsibility over the established agreements between OBIS and its substantial contributions to Global Biodiversity Information Facility, the Convention on Biological Diversity and to other existing and potential partners. In this regard we also wish to refer to the outcome of the “OBIS (Ocean Biogeographic Information System) Strategy and Work plan Meeting” (IOC Workshop Report No. 226: http://www.iode.org/wr226) which clearly outlines the societal benefits of the OBIS database and its products (e.g. the shift in marine species diversity and distribution in response to global warming; invasive species; differentiating climate and fishing effects in ecosystem-based management; biodiversity data repatriation).

The purpose of this Letter is to inform you that the IOC Trust Fund, dedicated to OBIS, has now been established and to invite you to contribute to the Fund so as to enable the IOC to fulfil the commitment it made to the continuation and further development of OBIS.

Contributions to, and participation in, the IODE/OBIS programme will ensure the maintenance and growth of this young and hitherto underrepresented part of marine data and will facilitate the complex multidisciplinary studies necessary to understand ocean processes, their relation to global change and their interaction with human activities.

For the practical details regarding the Trust Fund we invite you to contact the Office of the IOC Executive Secretary.

Thanking you in advance for your cooperation,

[signed]

Dr Wendy Watson-Wright
IOC Executive Secretary
Assistant Director-General of UNESCO