

University of Toronto at Scarborough  
Department of Physical and Environmental Sciences

## **EES A06: Introduction to Planet Earth**

**Winter 2016**

**Lectures: Monday: 10-12    Room AC 223**

**Professor Nick Eyles**

### **Introduction**

This is an introductory geoscience course aimed at anyone in the sciences or humanities.

You will learn how planet Earth 'works' by visiting countries in very different geologic settings and by meeting some of the peoples that live in very dangerous areas affected by earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions. We will examine how the earth formed and has evolved in the ancient past, how we determine the age of ancient rocks and events and the nature of changing paleoenvironments on the planet over its 4.5 billion year history. The course will conclude with a brief review of the geologic history of Canada, the importance of natural resources to our economy, and some of the environmental problems facing our country and world.

The course is organized around the 5-part *Geologic Journey- World* series which aired on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's 'The Nature of Things' in late 2010 with David Suzuki and myself and which is downloadable from the CBC website or can be purchased.

The accompanying textbook is Plummer et al., 2007 '*Physical Geology and the Environment*' 2nd Canadian Edition available as an ebook through the bookstore upon purchase of a code.

## Introduction to geology

The scientific discipline of Geology is 'the study of planet Earth' and is sometimes called Earth Science or Geoscience. The science began as a distinct discipline and profession in the 19<sup>th</sup> century primarily concerned with finding mineral resources such as coal and metal ores for industry. It became a pillar of 19<sup>th</sup> century science by demonstrating the great age of the Earth ('deep time') which underpinned Darwin's recognition that organisms have evolved through time.

The emphasis on finding scarce resources in a growing and increasingly urban world continues and has widened to include other resources such as groundwater. Today, Geology is concerned with exploring Earth history and the history of life on earth, and increasingly dealing with emerging environmental issues especially the impacts of climate change and urbanization (a field called 'Environmental Geoscience' which is a Specialist Undergraduate Program within the Department of Physical and Environmental Sciences (DPES)).

There is a shortage of suitably qualified environmental geoscientists in Canada. The profession requires well-trained individuals and offers many diverse opportunities for a career. DPES offers a popular 12 month M.Env.Sc program.

## Course summary

Planet Earth formed about 4.56 billion (Giga annum or Ga) years ago by condensation and accretion of dust and planetary debris. The oldest rocks on Earth are dated at about 4.2 Ga suggesting that continents had already formed, the oldest bacterial life forms at about 3.5 Ga and an oxygenated atmosphere developed somewhere around 2 Ga before present. Multicellular animal life forms became abundant about 600 million years ago (600 Ma: mega annum: Ma: an even called the 'Cambrian Explosion') and the history of life has been conditioned by episodic extinction events some possibly created by meteorite impacts.

The hard rocky surface of the planet (the crust) is brittle and broken into large plates that are moved around at velocities up to 25 cm/yr by large convection cells in the hotter Earth's interior (the mantle). Alfred Wegener suggested the drift of continents in 1912 but it was rejected as implausible; how could continents move through solid rock? Today, it is realized that continents are embedded in larger lithospheric plates which move in their entirety over hot plastic rocks below; this process is called *plate tectonics* and it has been in operation for at least 3.5 Ga. It may not be the only way in which planet Earth functions however and there is increasing recognition of so-called *vertical tectonics* involving giant mantle plumes of hot rock, and the outpouring of enormous volumes of magma

(flood basalts, supervolcanoes etc.,) when these plumes reach the Earth's surface.

Lithospheric plates originate at mid-ocean ridges (called 'spreading centers') where new volcanic magma rises to the surface from the underlying mantle and cools before being pushed apart by new magma arriving from depth. This is clearly seen in Iceland today where the mid-Atlantic Ridge is exposed on land. The movement of plates leads to collisions between adjoining plates (called *orogeny*) and destruction of some plates by a process called *subduction* where one plate (usually the oldest) is driven down below the other. This is happening along the west coasts of the Americas and around the Pacific and gives rise to large damaging earthquakes.

The entire plate tectonic process can be likened to a conveyor belt where new crust is created at spreading centres, and eventually destroyed by subduction. In this way, the Earth is neither expanding nor shrinking in size. In some cases, orogenic events result in the fusing together of plates and the creation of even larger plates (called supercontinents). Geologists have recognised a cycle of supercontinent formation and breakup (the Wilson cycle) which is the basic rhythm of Earth history. Much of Canada's and Ontario's geology reflects events during the formation and breakup of several supercontinents over the last 3 billion years most notably *Rodinia* which formed about 1 billion years ago and *Pangea* (about 400 to 200 million years ago). Planet Earth is currently in a phase of continent dispersal following the breakup of Pangea when the modern oceans first formed. The formation of the next supercontinent (Pangea II) will occur in another 200 million years' time. This basic process is driven by convection of hot rock in the deep mantle (fueled by the heat of radioactive decay) and is modeled to continue for another 4 billion years.

Ancient environments are preserved in the form of rocks and by study of the rock record we can reconstruct ancient paleoenvironments. The concept that the present is the key to the past is called *uniformitarianism*. Apart from catastrophic events like large meteorite impacts that result in widespread extinctions, the concept has served geologists well. We shall examine the history of life on planet Earth and how it reflects broader tectonic and climatic events.

The course concludes by looking at the 4 billion years long geological history of Canada and Ontario including reference to modern environmental problems facing Canadians. We will look at the causes and impacts of climate change, mineral exploration and mining, the impact of urban development, disposal of a wide variety of wastes, the clean-up of contaminated sites and waters, and the key role that environmental geoscience plays in our society.

At the conclusion of this course you will know how planet Earth 'works.'

## Evaluation and marks

The course will be evaluated by:

- a) A multiple-choice Mid-term Exam consisting of 100 questions (30marks)
- b) A poster assignment on a topic illustrating the geology of Canada or Ontario. This can be done either individually or in student groups *of up to 4*, and will be presented at a 'Planet Earth Conference' in the Meeting Place on Monday March 7th in place of the normal lecture; (40 marks)
- c) A multiple-choice Final Exam; (30 marks)

Please read assigned chapters in the text book *ahead of the lecture*. 'Terms to remember' are listed at the end of each chapter in the textbook and have been grouped into a Glossary on pp. 585-595. 'Testing your knowledge': please read and think about the questions listed at the end of each chapter, as some of these will be used in the mid- and final exams.

Lectures will be videotaped and available for 3 weeks after the lecture for web-option students.

*Note: Last date to drop course without penalty is Sunday March 20<sup>th</sup>*

## Things to remember

1. Topics for the poster assignment will be announced later. Note that late work will be docked 10% per day. Late submissions for medical reasons require full documentation on *UTSC medical forms* [available in the content section on BB].
2. Please check the Blackboard course site regularly for updates.
3. We have experienced teaching assistants so utilize them; they are there to assist you. Enquiries regarding course material can be directed to the TA's via the Blackboard discussion board or in person to me and the TA's during office hours. The TA office hours will be posted very shortly on Blackboard.
4. **Plagiarism** will not be tolerated; it is an academic offence and will be immediately reported to the Dean.
5. **AccessAbility Services**: Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the AccessAbility Services Office as soon as possible. I will work with you and

AccessAbility Services to ensure you can achieve your learning goals in this course. Enquiries are confidential. The UTSC AccessAbility Services staff (located in S302) are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations (416) 287-7560 or [ability@utsc.utoronto.ca](mailto:ability@utsc.utoronto.ca).

**6.** There are about 1000 students in this course. Do NOT email me because I will not reply. There are frequently asked questions and answers on Blackboard and the TAs and I have weekly office hours to be announced shortly.

I am also usually available 20 minutes prior to the lecture outside AC223 (drinking coffee) so if you have pressing questions or any issues that will affect your participation or performance in this course please feel free to see me then, or after the lecture.

Good luck

Nick Eyles