

Speech Launch Wageningen Soil Network

Date: 26th January 2015

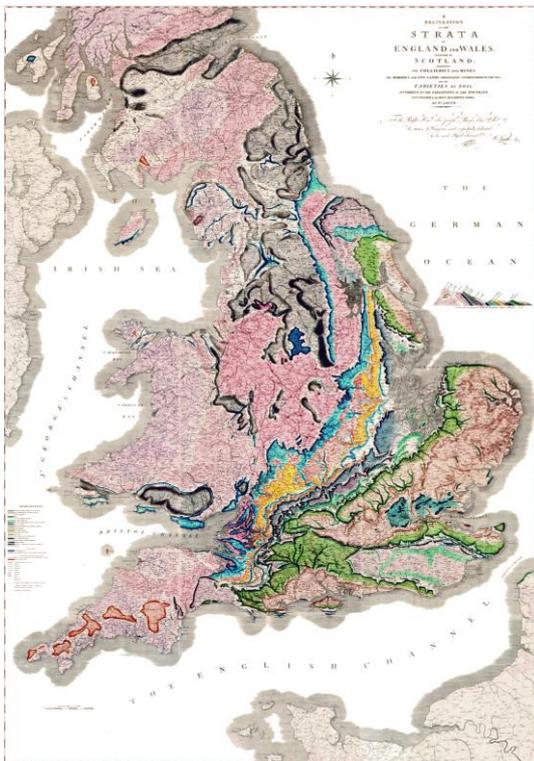
Place: Orion building, Wageningen Campus



Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

For various reasons 1815 was a memorable year. Napoleon escapes from Elba and re-establishes power in Paris but is a few months later defeated by Wellington in the Battle of Waterloo. In Indonesia, the Tambora volcano erupts in 1815 in the biggest blast in 10,000 years, cooling global temperatures by 3 degrees in 1816. And in the Netherlands King Willem I is being crowned and Sunday observance is regulated by law.

But also for the earth sciences it was a landmark year, because in 1815 a man by the name of William Smith published the first full scale, national Geological map in the world. It was the geological map of Great Britain. It proved to be a map that would forever change the way we view the world. And the remarkable thing is that since this first map of the geology of Great Britain (shown in figure) was published, stunningly little has changed when you compare it to the current geological map of the UK. Only minor improvements could be made upon this map. Of course a lot more geological information on the age and composition of rock layers has been discovered, but the general pattern of the geology was laid down in this map of 1815.



For at least two reasons it is worth remembering the publication of this map in 2015, the International Year of Soils. First of all it reminds us of the fact that much of the earth sciences has a strongly practical inclination. William Smith was an engineer who built canals, and for this job he needed information on the characteristics of the earth in which he had to build. Building canals in the entire country and having a keen mind for logical thought and a huge interest for the natural environment, he started putting the puzzle of Great Britain's geological history together. Like William Smith's map the current attention for soils and the declaration of the International Year of Soils by the UN finds its origin in practical issues the world has to confront, most pressingly the production of Food, the conservation of Biodiversity and how to deal with Climate Change. This is reflected by the [key messages of the FAO](#), who is responsible for organizing this year.

The second reason to remember the story of William Smith is that it reminds us that most scientific progress is evolutionary in nature rather than revolutionary. It is the result of diligent work and of gradually developing insights. This means that we are still gradually building on the knowledge developed in earlier times. A prime example being of course the geological map of Great Britain. To remind us of another famous example of the 19th century. Charles Darwin, who published his revolutionary ideas on biological evolution in 1859, spent his last working years on what we would now call 'ecosystem services'. He studied the role of earthworms in producing fertile soils, and he wrote a full treatise on it, his last. We are still working on the role of earthworms in soil functioning up to this present day. So let's use the

International Year of Soils not only to think of 'innovative' new soil concepts, but let's also use this year to pay close attention to our earth- and soil-science heritage.

For those of you who want to know more about William Smith and his turbulent life - his wife went mad, his work was stolen by jealous colleagues, and he was imprisoned for debt - there is a wonderful [book by Simon Winchester entitled "The map that changed the world."](#) Really a must read for those interested in maps, in the earth sciences, or in 19th century Britain.

Now, let's return to the present, to Wageningen and to the Wageningen Soil Network. The proclamation of the International Year of Soils 2015 spurred the urge of people and organizations in Wageningen that work on soils to better send out the message, both nationally and internationally, that if you are looking for state-of-the-art soil expertise, Wageningen is the place to be. So a concerted action to promote this expertise was considered necessary. And by concerted we do not mean just the Wageningen UR soil related activities, but all Wageningen soil related activities. By ISRIC, by NIOO, by the Centre for Soil Ecology.

In the working group we are discussing and aligning a series of activities for the International Year of Soils 2015. These include activities that are initiated by individual partners, such as the second edition of the Wageningen Soil Conference that will be held in August in this very Orion Building. But we also develop new initiatives as a group, of which the Wageningen Soil Experience, a tour around the campus for visiting guests, is a good example.

In addition to promoting our expertise and organizing a series of activities in 2015 together, it is my hope that the Wageningen Soil Network could serve a higher goal, reaching beyond 2015, in stimulating and realizing more elaborate and concrete cooperation between all organizations working on soil related topics, and thus having an impact in the world to tackle global problems like food production, the availability of clean water, and dealing with climate change.

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