

Dear Jim, ICS bureau and sub-commission chairs,

Hereby the formal reaction of SNS, after consulting its members, on the concept of the proposal from ICS to send the INQUA proposal about the definition of the Quaternary and N/Q boundary directly to IUGS for approval. The reaction is based on the response received thus far.

It is clear that the majority of SNS members find the proposal totally unacceptable, but this may not come as a surprise following the outcome of the SNS questionnaire in preparation of the Leuven workshop in 2005. Summarizing it is not understood by SNS members:

- why we should give in to pressure from IUGS and INQUA and abandon our own principles and rules;
- why the compromise solution (i.e., in the Aubry et al., 2005, Episodes paper) that came out of the Leuven meeting is not acceptable for IUGS (is it only because it does not follow the “preferred” strict hierarchy of the chronostratigraphic scale?), and;
- why ICS did not push harder to get that solution accepted.

Based on the responses, four options favoured by SNS members emerged:

- 1) keep the present formal status with the Pliocene/Pleistocene and base Quaternary defined at Vrica at 1.81 Ma (9 in favour);
- 2) let INQUA have its own Quaternary climatostratigraphic time scale chart (10 in favour);
- 3) follow the INQUA option (3 in favour), and;
- 4) lower the Pliocene/Pleistocene boundary to 2.6 Ma equivalent with the (lowered) base of the Quaternary, but with the Quaternary as an Epoch and the Neogene extending to the Present (5 in favour).

The first solution is conservative and may at the end be the one favoured by IUGS if no other solution is reached. The idea is not to change the current definition as long as the outcome of the ongoing debate (if that will ever end) is unclear.

The second option is also easy to grasp and partly comes from the fact that INQUA decided to go its own way and separated from IUGS to become a full member of the ICSU (International Council for Science) implying that INQUA and IUGS are now independent unions (of equal status) under the ICSU. In fact, this would imply that the position of INQUA is no longer a major concern to us. In addition, having INQUA let its own scale would give justice to the “marine” and “continental” based traditions in the chronostratigraphic subdivision of the youngest part of the stratigraphic record. Moreover, it is not that far off from the compromise solution that came out of the Leuven meeting. It also has the additional advantage to get rid of the “superstages” preferred by INQUA; they can be included in their own scale, and we only have to make sure that our marine stages of the Pleistocene agree with their “superstages”.

The third option is the INQUA option.

The fourth option looks a bit like a variant of the compromise solution advocated in the Aubry et al. (2005) paper, but with important differences namely the Quaternary as an Epoch (instead of Subera) and the Pliocene/Pleistocene boundary lowered from 1.8 to 2.6 Ma.

We can then add a fifth solution to this list which is the compromise solution already reached during the ICS workshop held in Leuven two years ago itself. Clearly there is lack of understanding within the Neogene community why this solution was not taken more serious by INQUA and IUGS (and ICS).

SNS therefore asks ICS to abandon the proposed procedure for ICS voting on the Quaternary issue because the majority of SNS members does not agree with the INQUA solution advocated in the proposal and it is the Neogene that is (also) at stake here. In addition SNS finds the procedure itself incorrect and therefore unacceptable. This may not come as a surprise considering the fact that the Neogene community risks the danger of being passed over (this is the “not all people will be happy”, and of course this is not possible if we follow our own - normal - rules and procedures) and that ICS seems to be willing to give up its own procedures and principles to please IUGS and INQUA. We should simply not give in to IUGS and INQUA but base our decisions on scientific grounds and not political pressure.

If the ICS bureau nevertheless decides to continue with the procedure, we ask the voting members not to accept the proposal. It would be insupportable if the ballot would result in an outcome that is totally opposite from the outcome of the formal ballot two years ago in Leuven. SNS is still willing to look for an acceptable compromise that does justice to both practices in subdividing the youngest part of the time scale. It thereby still considers the solution that we accepted in Leuven as the best solution. If INQUA is not willing to accept such a compromise, then the best solution might well be to let them have their own Quaternary scale.

With best regards,
Frits Hilgen

Utrecht, April 12, 2007