

Introduction to Plate Tectonic Theory, Geodesy, and VLBI

The plate tectonic theory is a relatively new, accepted only around 50 years ago. The following website contains a more detailed and lesson plans on plate tectonics, geodesy, and VLBI.

<http://www.haystack.mit.edu/edu/pcr/GPS/index.html>

The Plate Tectonic Theory

In 1912, Alfred Wegener proposed that all the continents were at one time a single large continent that broke apart, and drifted through the ocean floor to where they are now. Wegener was first influenced by how the continents fit together, especially western Africa and eastern South America. When he compared the rock structures and composition of the coastlines of the continents mentioned above, he found them to be very similar. Wegener also examined fossil distribution, location and similarity and again found a strong correlation. For example, why was a specific trilobite only found in Massachusetts and in Scotland?

His theory of continental drift was not accepted in the scientific community because it conflicted with the established theories which were:

1. The continents' position are basically unchanged since when were formed. (Permanentists)
2. The Earth gradually contracted and the ocean floor became dry land, and dry land, in turn, became ocean floor (Contractionists)

South African geologist, Alexander Du Toit spent five months in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina examining the geology. He found that the same plant and animal fossils he knew in South Africa were embedded in the rock in the same sequence layer by layer.

Paleomagnetism, the study of the magnetism in rocks, provided more substantiation. When molten igneous rocks solidify, magnetic minerals in the rocks, (for example, iron oxides) align themselves with the Earth's magnetic field. The deviations in the magnetic alignment in these rocks from the current direction of the Earth's magnetic field showed that the continents have moved.

Finally during the 1960's two Cambridge scientists, Drummond Matthews and Fred Vine, discovered that on either side of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge there were a series

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