The International Lithosphere Program (ILP) was established in 1980 as the Inter-Union Commission on the Lithosphere (ICL) by the International Council for Science (ICSU), following a request from the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics (IUGG) and the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS). In 2005 ICSU transferred its sponsorship to IUGG and IUGS.

The ILP focuses on the nature, dynamics, origin, and evolution of the lithosphere, with special attention to the continents and their margins. Targeting these goals through international and interdisciplinary collaboration, ILP established several task forces and coordinating committees to pursue specific research objectives. Topics always follow one of the four ILP themes: global change, contemporary dynamics and deep processes, continental lithosphere, and ocean lithosphere. ILP's funding is limited to five year periods and just understood as seed money.

In the last four decades ILP was involved in the composition and set up of a number of worldwide leading light house projects: The GSHAP (Global Seismic Hazard Map), the ICDP (International Continental Drilling Project), the WSM (World Stress Map Project), the TOPO-Europe project and its follow up initiatives TOPO-Asia, TOPO Iberia – just to name a few. Currently ILP supports new initiatives on digitalization.

With its Flinn-Hart Award (until 2007 Hart Award), honouring outstanding young scientists for contributions in the field of solid Earth sciences, ILP motivated and promoted a generation of early career scientists. The new Evgueni Burov Medal from ILP, established in 2018, pays tribute to an outstanding researcher in solid Earth sciences and recognizes pioneering contributions by mid-career scientists.