
The universe: yours to discover

Kevin Govender

The International Year of Astronomy (IYA2009) was declared by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2007. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, together with the International Astronomical Union, are leading the celebrations under the theme '*The universe, yours to discover*'. IYA2009 marks the 400th anniversary of Galileo Galilei's first astronomical observation through a telescope. It will be a global celebration of astronomy and its contribution to society and culture, with a strong emphasis on education, public engagement and the involvement of young people.

IYA2009 is supported by 11 cornerstone projects—global programmes of activities centred on specific themes. Whether it is the support and promotion of women in astronomy, the preservation of dark-sky sites around the world, or educating and explaining the workings of the universe

to the public, these projects will be the key components of the programme. In recognition of the role that this event has to play in developing nations, especially those that have neither observatories nor astronomy departments in their universities, the 11th cornerstone project is entitled 'Developing Astronomy Globally'.

In South Africa celebrations kicked off with a six-day star party at Sutherland, which culminated in the dawn of the new year 2009 at midnight on 1 January. Later in the year several other local activities will be offered by our observatories, planetaria and science centres, which will be listed on the IYA2009 website www.astronomy2009.org.za

South Africa has also taken a leading role on the African continent to ensure that IYA2009 benefits as many people across Africa as possible, an objective in line with the vision of facilities such as the Southern African Large Telescope.

Through programmes such as the National Astrophysics and Space Science Programme and those offered by the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences in Cape Town, South Africa already hosts research training for students from across Africa. IYA2009 is an opportunity to significantly advance collaboration in Africa in the astronomy field.

IYA2009 is not just an opportunity to promote astronomy, but also to stimulate the imagination of young and old alike across the continent. We recognise that the most sustainable form of development is education, and celebrating a year of astronomy is an opportunity to stimulate curiosity in people's minds, and to inspire them towards adopting a learning culture. The theme adopted by the numerous African countries involved in IYA2009 is thus 'Astronomy for Education'. The year is not just going to be about appreciating the beautiful sky, but rather about what we in Africa can do with it, and how we can use this sky—this subject of astronomy—for the development of our people.

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