

A SNAPSHOT OF ASSA'S HEALTH & FOCUS FOR THE ENSUING YEAR

At the first Council meeting that I chaired last year I verbalised two intuitive objectives for myself:

- a. To facilitate the sharing of the expertise and experience at the various Centres and Sections more effectively among the astronomy community, and
- b. To strengthen ASSA's links to astronomy professionals and organizations.

I never got round to the second objective at all and based on my experience of the past year and my interpretation of the main focus for the second year of the current Council's term, I will leave that to my successor who, as a professional astronomer is better known in that fraternity and would probably serve ASSA's interests better in that regard.

In execution of the first objective of facilitating the effective and timeous sharing of experience and expertise among the various Centres, Council kindly approved a ceiling budget to cover the unavoidable expenses pertaining to such visits by myself. The Association was fortunate in the sense that it was possible to tag visits onto other trips that I undertook as a Director of the Institute of Timber Construction, which resulted in a major cost savings to the Society. Bloemfontein was the most expensive leg of this journey but even after all those costs are known the total costs of the exercise should end up well below the limit approved by Council.

My visits to all of the ASSA Centres and discussions with most of the Section Directors was personally very insightful and hopefully mutually beneficial. A few summarising observations:

1. There a truly impressive range of astronomical activity at the various Centres and expertise in the various Sections. The feedstock of "the study and enjoyment of astronomy" (our mission) is therefore broad and secure.
2. Not surprisingly the prime focus and *modus operandi* of the various Centres is almost unique, obviously driven by local considerations, experience and to a large extent by access to facilities (observatories in particular): Pretoria's prime focus on observing is clear and impressive, Durban's outreach numbers sometimes almost unmanageable, Johannesburg's range of observation + research activities is impressive and Cape Town's range of guest speakers (*twice a month!*) is mouth-watering and their public viewing in (and in collaboration with) Kirstenbosch can only be admired. The Midlands Centre's efforts in re-establishing the Centre is admirable and warrants whatever support ASSA can provide. Garden Route's members are described by Case as "armchair astronomers" but they are very participative and sharp, with a few exceptionally experienced members. Bloemfontein focuses very strongly on irregular but well attended observation sessions utilising the facilities of Boyden Observatory, specifically the 13" and 16" telescopes

3. Equally unsurprising is that the older Centres have settled into their “proven successful” comfort zones whereas the newer ones are still exploring what works best for them. The Pretoria Centre appears to be the most “set-in-its-ways”, whereas the Hermanus Centre is the only one that embodies and successfully practises the concept of Special Interest Groups (beginners, cosmology, astrophotography and a Study Group).
4. There are a few common denominators:
 - a. Centre Chairs are generally the driving force behind their Centres and as such are an extremely precious resource for ASSA - which should therefore *not* be overburdened by ASSA commitments.
 - b. Centre Committees are the heartthrob of amateur astronomy activity in the country and should be supported and empowered in whatever ways are possible.
 - c. Centres exist to meet the needs of their members and therefore not surprisingly operate as island universes predominantly driven by internal demand. The question therefore needs to be asked (and it was asked twice during my visits): What are the benefits of ASSA membership to organised astronomy clubs or organizations?

Two obvious benefits of ASSA membership are:

- i. Access to its excellent publications SGAS and MNASSA, although the latter is in the public domain and free of charge;
- ii. Face-to-face interaction with others sharing your interest in astronomy – frequently more knowledgeable or experienced than you – at Centre observation or outreach sessions or Star Parties, which will give access to extra-Centre people and expertise.

The visits to all the Centres strongly re-enforced my intuitive conviction that there is extensive and intensive expertise and experience vested in the Centres which is *not* shared. A proposal to provide a two-monthly finger-on-the-pulse of all astronomy activities, practises, concepts or projects undertaken throughout the country has already been submitted to and approved by Council. The rationale underlying this concept is obvious: If you become aware of cool ideas or concepts or practises in other parts of the country it will probably induce at least consideration of duplicating other Centres’ successes in your own.

A key to the success of this proposal is that it must be *comprehensive & concise* and *easy to update & acquire*. An initial Excel reporting format, extensively “professionalised” by Chris Stewart, did not elicit a positive response. It is my conviction that this is the correct route and will therefore vigorously pursue selling the benefits of participation to all Centres.

The second leg of the proposal was to include every Section Director, whose roles are to *coordinate & lead* the activities in their specialist section country-wide, in all the activities of their specialist sections in all Centres. Obviously the first and simplest step is to include the relevant Section Director(s) in the Centre Specialist

Interest Groups' e-mail lists. By way of illustration, the ASSA Cosmology Section Director - Frikkie de Bruin – has already been included in the Hermanus Centre's two Cosmology Interest Groups e-mail lists. Frikkie being Frikkie has already responded to these communications and therefore proved its practical application.

Thank You Frikkie for adding value to both your Specialist Section and the Hermanus Centre's special interest groups activities.

Obviously the third and perhaps most challenging leg of the proposal is to include at least the activity reports of non-ASSA astronomy clubs (Soutpansberg, West Rand, South Peninsula, Senekal, Grahamstown, Windhoek) and other astronomy related groups and activities (the Star Parties, Orion Observation Group, Scopex, ATM Class, the Star People) as well as educational outreach anywhere in the country. It would be wonderful to have an almost real-time overview of all astronomy activities country-wide.

The Afrikaans saying "Beloftes maak skuld" is very true and I do appreciate the daunting challenges facing one to achieve this worthy objective, but I will be focusing on this ideal for the remaining year of my term.

In order to at least practise my obsessive preaching of sharing expertise and experiences I'll end by sharing with you a recent worthwhile and easily replicated project of the Hermanus Centre: The construction of a True Scale model of the Solar System over 3.9km on the Cliff Path in Hermanus.

[A PowerPoint overview of the project, which will be published in the forthcoming issue of MNASSA, was then given.]

I thank you for your kind attention.

Pierre de Villiers