
ASSA: CITIZEN SCIENCE SECTION ANNUAL REPORT (2018-2019)

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Astronomical Society of South Africa held its symposium on the theme of “Astronomy in the Digital Age”. Many of the speakers, most notably Dr Stella Kafka of the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO), spoke at length on citizen science. In response, the ASSA council established the Citizen Science Section, and appointed Allen Versfeld as its director.

The Citizen Science section has two mandates: To encourage and support ASSA members participating in citizen science projects, and to provide technical assistance to South African researchers who wish to set up their own citizen science projects.

RELATIONSHIPS

In November 2018, the director set up a relationship with Dr Pamela Gay, who is the Director of Technology and Citizen Science for the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. Dr Gay has long been involved with CosmoquestX, which runs a number of citizen science projects to map the surfaces of the Moon, Mercury, Mars and the asteroid Bennu, from photographic images collected by satellites and robotic spacecraft. She has both technical and administrative experience in running these projects and is willing to assist us with setting up our own projects. Our conversations so far have focussed on general principles of citizen science projects, such as the importance of setting a project’s scope before starting work or understanding the difference between projects that have scientific value, and those whose primary purpose is science outreach. For example, a project like Galaxy Zoo has scientific value because it allowed for the categorization of an enormous amount of data and led to the publication of many papers, while projects to measure the distance to the Moon by measuring parallax of a stellar occultation are more useful to educate the public about astronomical methods and create enthusiasm for more complicated experiments.

The Technology and Citizen Science Section of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific remain available to assist or advise us for any future projects we may choose to launch in future.

PROJECTS

Currently, ASSA has no citizen science projects of its own. However, the Center for Astronomical Heritage (CfAH) plans to launch a project soon to tag and categorise records, photographs and image plates from various South African Observatories. This project is still in development, and at the time of our last communication, CfAH were still busy digitising the original records for future categorisation.

Dr Corlia Meyer of Stellenbosch University is running a project with Prof Peter Weingart to determine what the citizen science landscape looks like in South Africa. She has made several enquiries of the Citizen Science Section about projects that we are involved in, our plans for future projects, and our member’s involvement in citizen science projects. She is interested to know who is running projects, what disciplines are involved, and the methods used by those projects. We have assisted to the best of our abilities.

CONCLUSION

While this new section has achieved some of its early goals, there is still some work to be done. We have not yet compiled a list of projects to recommend to ASSA members who would like to participate in citizen science projects, and we have not yet collected any records on what projects our members are active in, or are interested in.

These will therefore be the primary goals for the next 12 months. For this reason, we would like to invite any ASSA members with an interest in citizen science to contact the director at the official email address: citizenscience@assa.saao.ac.za

In conclusion, the director of the section would like to thank the ASSA council for creating the section and giving him the opportunity to serve as director. We have high hopes for what we can build on the foundation we've built this far.

Thank you.