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Report from the ASSA Council 2013-2014

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1 Introduction

After having served for one year as president of the Astronomical Society of Southern Africa (ASSA), it is my privilege to present this report from the ASSA Council. It includes a brief overview of ASSA as an organization, followed by a brief summary of the activities of the Council during the year 2013 to 2014. Lastly, with the aim of providing some guidelines for the immediate future, I take a somewhat personal look back to my own interactions and involvement with ASSA over the years.

2 The Society

Astronomy plays a significant role within the scientific community in South Africa and I think we can claim that within the astronomical community of South Africa, SSA has a strong presence. It provides a home for both professional and amateur astronomers, though the majority of members are amateur astronomers. ASSA's publications include the *MNASSA*, *The Sky Guide Africa South* and the content of the society's official website. Members who have not done so recently would be well advised to visit and explore our webpage at <http://assa.sao.ac.za>. ASSA is governed by a constitution that is revised from time to time (e.g. in 1979 and 2011) but there have been more frequent amendments, most recently in November 2013. Members can find the updated constitution on the web page. The

ASSA web page is also useful to non-ASSA members since it contains information on astronomy in South Africa in general: for example on non-ASSA astronomy clubs, outreach events, etc.

The objectives of the Society (as indicated in the constitution) are:

- To encourage and stimulate the study and practice of astronomy, *inter alia* by awarding scholarships to deserving candidates at tertiary institutions.
- To establish and maintain various *sections* in order to: -
- facilitate astronomical observing by *members* and to receive and report astronomical observations made - facilitate astronomical outreach by *the society*.
- To disseminate information about astronomy that may be of use to observers, and to others interested in astronomy, by means of *publications*.
- To do all such lawful things conducive to the attainment of these objectives.

The Council has the responsibility to provide leadership and support so that the society and all its members can work towards these objectives. There are seven ASSA Centres, four along the coast – Cape, Hermanus, Garden Route and Durban Centres, and three in the interior of South Africa – Pretoria, Johannesburg and Bloemfontein. Members of the Centres are automatically members of ASSA.

Membership of the Centres varies between 20 and 100 giving a total of approximately 400 members. Because of geographic and other considerations, there are also Country Members for whom it is not possible to participate in the activities of a Centre. Adding the Country Members the total membership of ASSA at present is approximately 800. ASSA provides a home for a range of people, from the professional astronomer, the serious amateur and the enthusiastic members of the public. I am convinced that we can safely claim that the impact of ASSA exceeds the number of its members by far. This is thanks to the use of the

electronic communication media, events like star parties and ScopeX as well as the involvement of ASSA's members in various astronomy outreach projects not necessarily organized by ASSA itself.

To further its objective to "*facilitate astronomical observing by members and to receive and report astronomical observation*" and also to "*facilitate astronomical outreach*" the society relies on its specialized Sections. According to the constitution, "*The council will form sections of the society to co-ordinate and monitor specific areas of activity within the society so as to ensure that the society meets its objectives.*" There are eight Sections – Deep Sky, Shallow Sky, Dark Sky (emphasizing the sky and what is out there to be observed) and five additional sections which emphasize the human endeavours and techniques in studying the astronomical universe. The reports from the Sections appeared in the previous edition of *MNASSA*.

3 The Council

There are 14 Council members which include the chairs of the seven Centres. The Council met approximately every second month via Skype during this period. The use of Skype for Council meetings was initiated by Council Member Chris Stewart a few years ago. As a result, Council meetings are well attended with typically only two or three apologies.

The secretary, Lerika Cross, plays an active and very important role in the activities of the ASSA Council, including preparing agendas and minutes for each meeting. She also takes care of a lot of follow-up work to provide momentum to decisions of the Council. The Section chairs frequently update the Council on the activities of the Sections. Council is also kept up to date by the various Council Appointees such as the editors of *MNASSA* and the *Sky Guide*.

Highlights of activities during this period include:

- important amendments to the constitution;

- improving communication channels - Auke Slotegraaf, assisted by the ASSA webmaster Christian Hettlage, undertook a revision of the existing ASSA website. A major novelty is the new discussion forum
- Improved communication between ASSA and ASSET (Astronomical Society of Southern Africa Endowment Trust) with an ASSET Trustee, Tim Copper, now participating in Council meetings and a Council member, Ian Glass, appointed as an ASSET Trustee after the retirement of Mr Andrew Gray, who is thanked for his many years of service.
- Auke Slotegraaf continued as Editor of the *Sky Guide* and was given a contract for the 2015 edition;
- *MNASSA* has been published 6 times during the year electronically. Case Rijdsijk has continued as Editor, Ian Glass has taken over the typesetting and layout and Lia Labuschagne has taken over as Book Editor. Both Willie Koorts and Maciej Soltynski are thanked for their years of service. The website is www.mnassa.org.za.
- The treasurer, Adv. A J Nel, has been corresponding with the Department of Social Development on getting the ASSA registered as non-profit organization, NPO.

4 Reaching ASSA's Objectives

4.1 Looking back

Rather than setting out theoretical models for how ASSA should further its objectives, I will discuss the issue as viewed from the context of my personal experience to illustrate how ASSA (and other institutions) was there when it mattered.

My involvement with astronomy and the ASSA originated in an interesting way. The seed of my interest in astronomy was planted when I attended the Wits Planetarium as a young boy from the Free State. Later, in 1985, as just another member of the general public I heard about the approach of Halley's Comet. Another visit to the Wits Planetarium provided powerful additional momentum and it was during that time that I moved to the

then University of the Orange Free State to start teaching in the Physics Department. Of course I needed a telescope to look for the comet. I borrowed a telescope designed for terrestrial use and made quite a few “discoveries” in the sky including “another comet” near the Southern Cross. While attending my first ASSA meeting ever in the old telescope building of Carl Henize on the site of the Lamont-Hussey Observatory on Naval Hill in Bloemfontein, I learned that “my comet” was a globular cluster containing approximately 1 million stars. I experienced a paradigm shift when I looked at the resolved cluster through the “fantastic” 8-inch telescope of Mr. Hammie Terblanche from Dewetsdorp. I thought at that time that he must be very wealthy. The ASSA members told me that I should be able to see Saturn in the early morning hours through a 4.5-inch telescope that I convinced the Physics Department to buy. I was totally unaware of the 60-inch telescope of the UOFS at Boyden Observatory. I did find Saturn and showed it to many other people and so started my life in astronomy outreach. With all the excitement around Halley’s Comet, and having learned in the meantime that the university actually had an observatory, we arranged a visit for the students to Boyden Observatory. I remember that we were not even allowed to come near the 60-inch telescope building, but nevertheless we saw a magnificent comet through the historic 10-inch Metcalf telescope. This was followed by the fragments of Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 colliding with Jupiter in 1994. The Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Pretoria Centres collaborated to share this “show” on the SABC-TV link from Sutherland with thousands of people. This was supplemented with images from the Boyden 60-inch telescope using a CCD camera. (See also *MNASSA* Vol. 53 Nos 9 & 10). By that time I had been introduced to all the ‘elements’ that dominated the next 20 years – and more – of my life: physics, telescopes, ASSA, Boyden and Lamont-Hussey ... which became a planetarium recently. It was interesting to see quite a number of the ASSA members who participated in the 1994 Shoemaker-Levy and Jupiter activities at the recent AGM in Johannesburg. One of them, Chris Stewart, received a President’s Award for his initiative in starting a Telescope Makers Class and continuing with it for the next 20 years.

4.2 Looking forward

All enthusiastic members of ASSA will have their own unique story to tell. *The question now arises: how ASSA can contribute to the stories of future astronomers and amateur astronomers.* For the large part we can just stay with the basics:

- Provide opportunities for people to see the celestial delights through a telescope;
- Provide opportunities for more people to visit South Africa's few planetariums and astronomical observatories;
- Take advantage of special astronomical events and spread the message using the mass media.

Since astronomy is very much a hands-on and an observational science, we should also *“facilitate astronomical observing by members”*. With this in mind, we should add:

- Provide training opportunities for ASSA members so that they can participate in astronomical observations and report their observations to the relevant Sections;
- Promote the “maker culture” of building one's own telescope.

There has been a significant growth in the professional astronomy community in South Africa during the last few years thanks to projects such as SALT, NASSP and SKA. Along with this the number of astronomy enthusiasts in the country is also steadily growing due to the high profile of these projects. However, the same cannot yet been said about the number of ASSA members and Centres. Thus, ASSA should draft a healthy growth strategy by:

- increasing participation of existing members, recruiting more Country Members and, where possible, establish new Centres;
- broadening its geographical footprint in line with being the Astronomical Society of **Southern** Africa;

ASSA should also consider “voluntary associations” with informal astronomy clubs that are more widely spread over the country than the Centres.

1. Congratulations and words of thanks

It is my privilege to thank all my colleagues on the ASSA Council for their dedication to the Society and the amount of time they spend on the activities of the Council and the Society. It is also an honour to congratulate the ASSA members who received the following awards during the 2014 AGM (See the previous edition of *MNASSA* for more information):

- **McIntyre Award to Dr Ian Glass** for his publication, Nicolas-Louis de la Caille - Astronomer and Geodesist;
- **Merit Award to Auke Slotegraaf** for his sterling contribution to the modernisation of the ASSA website, as well as establishing the new ASSA communication channels, whilst maintaining his normal high standard as Deep Sky Section Director;
- **Long Service Award to Maciej Soltynski** in appreciation for his many valuable contributions made to furthering ASSA interests over 25 years.
- **President’s Award to Chris Stewart** for his contribution to the art of telescope making in South Africa for a period of 20 years.

ASSA Endowment Trust (ASSET)

Report of the Trustees of the ASSA Endowment Trust (ASSET) to the Annual General Meeting of ASSA 2014

We are pleased to report that during the 2013 year, all outstanding amounts due to SARS have been settled.

The Trust's accounts are fully up to date and the two years 2012 and 2013 are presently with the auditors. Copies of the yearly accounts have been made available to ASSA and to *MNASSA*.

One Trustee advised that he wished to retire from that position and this was put into effect in the current, 2014 year, when Mr. M A L Gray who has been a trustee since the inception of the Trust in 1976 was replaced by Dr. I S Glass. We wish Mr. Gray a very happy and restful retirement in Brak River where we understand he has already formed a new astronomy club. We are also delighted to welcome Dr. Glass.

The Trustees have been concerned with the reduction of both the number and the total amount of donations to the Trust in recent years. To counteract this, it was suggested to ASSA Council that short appeals could perhaps appear in both *MNASSA* and the *Sky Guide*. We will continue our efforts to encourage more support in future years.