

Running a Private Observatory* for the Public

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1. Benefits and vital aspects of private ownership

Private ownership has several advantages over communal ownership by a club or other organisation, where experience in the Cape Centre showed that everyone left everything to everyone else so that nothing was done by anyone at all. No observations, no use of the telescope by members, no demonstrations to visitors, not even sweeping the floor or dusting worktops. With only a few owners, regular planning meetings are held, a definite duty schedule is drawn up and anyone who doesn't pull his weight is soon sorted out. This just didn't happen with the larger body. Perhaps the major difference is that each of our six owners has put in a sizeable share of his or her own money and thus has a vested interest.

Finance becomes extremely important and income sources must be established. Fortunately visitors are happy to pay a reasonable admission charge or to make donations if a suitable box is provided. (It is usually not possible to staff a gate for the sale of tickets as all available hands are needed at the telescopes.) Each of our partners pays his or her own expenses and also contributes a subscription

which jointly becomes sufficient to cover our essential overheads such as rent and electricity. Funds for further development of the Observatory itself come entirely from donations made by visitors.

Location of the Observatory needs careful selection. Naturally, good dark skies are important – especially for photography – but access by a sizeable number of casual visitors must also be considered. Weekend accommodation for families together with daytime amusements may be necessary if the site is well away from town. In our case we are 47 kilometres from the nearest tarred road in the middle of a very hot area in summer. Life without swimming facilities would be unbearable.

2. Organisation - Buildings, equipment and staff

The normal first step would be to plan the buildings with definite objectives in mind, but although this was not done at Cederberg, it has not proved to be a problem except for the constant embarrassing questions regarding the contents of the still empty rotating dome.

With six owners involved, there will always be differences of interest so there is no point in trying to run a common observing programme for the observatory. The provision of facilities to enable each to follow his or her own wishes is much more important. And those facilities include a lot of attention being paid to such vital items as toilets, showers, sleeping accommodation and food. Contrary

* The term "Private Observatory" refers only to the ownership of the establishment which is made available to as many people as possible, whether general public with only a passing interest or astronomers who have more definite ideas regarding what they want. All these comments are based on experience at the Cederberg Observatory and will hopefully be of use to others in the future.

to first expectations it is not necessary to have expensive state of the art telescopes and other equipment, as most visiting amateur and professional astronomers bring their own equipment which is obviously the best suited to their own needs.

Having staff available most weekends would seem to be no problem with six partners to choose from, but more than one person is needed every open weekend. At first we aimed to staff the observatory for two weekends per month, but this developed to every weekend except at Full Moon - and our facilities were becoming strained. One or two partners started asking friends from the Society, especially the Cape Centre, to accompany them and soon we developed our present system of "Wardens."

To become a Warden, a person has to have been to the Cederberg Observatory several times and have learned such mundane skills as where to switch gas and electricity on and off, how to manipulate the water supply system and have met the landowners. On top of this they must be capable of operating any telescopes or other equipment on the site including assembling, dismantling and storage. Finally they have to be capable of delivering the slide lecture to the public and answering any questions which arise. (Naturally, the most common question is "Please can you show us a black hole?")

After all the hard work and learning, what do the wardens get out of it? Because of their knowledge, Wardens naturally stand a much better chance of being asked to accompany a partner for a week-end and good dark skies are always in demand. They may even be asked to take a weekend on their own without any partners around which gives them the chance to take their families. If they wish to make use of the observatory on a weekend which is not normally manned (e.g. full moon) they can do so - the only condition being that if they are at

the Observatory, they *must* run an Open Night on the Saturday. That condition applies equally to partners who give their own families a treat at full moon weekends.

Initially, visitors open-nights held on Saturday evenings consisted of a few slides and then as much time as possible spent looking through the telescopes. A common slide show was developed and used by whoever happened to be on duty that weekend. As we became bored with the same set of slides we realised that some visitors who had attended five or six times or more were also bored with them. Some of us collected our own slide shows so the programme now varies with the presenter. There is however always an emergency set of slides at the Observatory.

Partners can leave the Observatory and sell their share if they so wish, but any purchaser *must* be approved by all the other partners and be capable of all our normal duties. Because of this, Wardens have an advantage over anyone else when a share in the partnership comes on the market. It may not be generally realised that shares have changed hands a total of five times since the original memorandum of agreement was drawn up on 24 May 1988.

3. Visitors – specialised and casual

Both amateur and professional astronomers and photographers visit our observatory frequently and by means of the bush telegraph we have become known in the USA, Great Britain, Belgium and Germany, from all of which countries we have had visiting astronomers. For *The Photographic Atlas of the Stars*, H.J.P. Arnold took 21 of the map photographs at the Cederberg – out of a total of 51 covering the whole sky. This gave us major publicity and we must thank Professor Tony Fairall (who is here today) for the original introduction to "Douglas" Arnold via Patrick Moore, who is a co-author of the atlas with the late Paul Doherty.

Every year we receive several requests from schools to cater for a group of pupils ranging in numbers up to 60 or so. These are often for mid-week dates when bookings on the local farms are not so crowded and schools can be accommodated. We do our best to help them and are sometimes asked to do follow-up talks for both pupils and parents in Cape Town a week or two later. Groups of astronomers such as the Cape Centre are regular visitors and we are pleased to have them. Any visitors from other parts of the country who are here on holiday are more than welcome.

Saturday evening is the time for our regular Open Nights when attendances vary from only half a dozen or so on cold winter nights to well over 100 in the summer. We do *not* have a closing time. There have been occasions when discussion and questions have gone on well into the small hours, frequently helped by some steaming cups of coffee.

A donations box lives next to the Visitors' book which everyone is encouraged to sign and add a short comment. The comments in-

clude some real gems and I particularly remember the quote from General MacArthur on leaving the Philippines in World War II: "I shall return!" About four months later we found the same signature with "I kept my promise." The Visitors Book has a very important part to play. Various businesses and individuals have assisted us with major donations or price reductions simply because they see how many people we are introducing to the night skies, astronomy and science in general. That book is one of our most valuable assets.

4. Our "Raison d'etre"

We do not try to teach astronomy. We just want to get people interested. Hopefully interested enough to join the Society and to read up all the things we don't have time to cover. We have a magnificent sky to help us do it. As our brochure says: "The Southern Hemisphere has skies of unrivalled beauty - we want to share them with you."