

A SNAPSHOT OF ASSA'S HEALTH

If this were a Court hearing and I were counsel for the defendant my summarising statement would be a lengthy "Your Honour, I rest my case".

The high quality of the Section Directors' reports attest in a very unequivocal manner to the fact that amateur astronomy in South Africa is very much alive and extremely healthy. There is a truly impressive range of astronomical activity at the various centres, clubs and associations, which is matched by an almost unbelievable expertise in the various Sections. The feedstock of "the study and enjoyment of astronomy" (ASSA's mission) is therefore broad and secure.

At the first Council meeting that I chaired two years ago I verbalised my primary objective as being the facilitation of sharing the expertise and experience at the various Centres and Sections more effectively among the astronomy community.

Practical interaction with the various groups has substantially modified my initial, intuitive objective of enticing all non-centre entities into becoming recognised ASSA centres. I now understand that the nature of the entity, whether it is an ASSA centre or non-ASSA Astronomy Club or simply an association, is irrelevant - as long as they continue stimulating an interest in astronomy. Having a constitution or even a committee is not as important as satisfying their members' needs, which is frequently no more than regular intellectual entertainment ("armchair astronomers", as Case Rijdsdijk refers to them).

However, creating an awareness of the incredible resources that ASSA offers through its website, publications, discussion groups and expertise and experience on just about any topic imaginable somewhere in the country elicited a universally positive response. The way forward is clearly to maintain an interest in and encourage non-ASSA centres to continue what they are doing so enthusiastically and even passionately and make them aware of ASSA's resources.

By way of illustration the West Rand Astronomy Club has decided to become a formal ASSA centre, whereas the Southern Peninsula Astronomy Club "will consider" whether they will become formally organised and apply for ASSA recognition. I will be visiting the Brak River Astronomy Club in October and Kos Coronaios's move to Pearly Beach will obviously impact the club's physical activities in Louis Trichardt, but Kos does intend to continue the club's activities from its more southerly base.

Each entity exists to cater for its members' needs and is therefore unique, operating as an island universe predominantly driven by internal demand. Whether its prime focus is observation, educational outreach or simply intellectual entertainment, it is stimulating an interest in astronomy and that is good.

My initial ideal of a two-monthly summary of astronomical activity around the country proved intractable because of non-uniform and incomplete inputs and was therefore discontinued. Collectively there is a lot of activity around the country. Chris Stewart's

summary of inputs that he did receive showed that almost 10,000 people were involved in astronomical activity over the report period. Of this total outreach affected or “reached” over 6,000 people. Observing and regular meeting participation comprised about 10% each, with cosmology a surprising if distant third.

Council did approve adding a link to future activities at the various locations on the website, but this has yet to be completed.

In summary, it must be clear to all present this evening that the Society is in a healthy state. Council is functioning very effectively, the Section Directors and Appointees are doing great specialist work and the finances are sound, if not as comfortable as we would like. Adding the Cooke Scholarship fund to ASSA’s own funds has enabled the Treasurer to obtain a higher interest rate than the two funds could achieve separately. Once ASSET has resolved the hitches that they are temporarily experiencing, the trustees could consider participating as well.

It has been a personally rewarding privilege to serve as President for the past two years. I gladly acknowledge and thank all Council members and Appointees for the dedication and enthusiastic manner in which they participated in ASSA activities and discharged their voluntary obligations. It’s a pleasure working with such a bunch of knowledgeable and committed members. Thank you to each and every one.

I must extend a special word of appreciation to Lerika. The Secretary has the thankless obligation to be the initiator, coordinator, outcomes-demanding follow-upper and, where necessary, nagger in what is arguably the most demanding and important portfolio on Council. ASSA has greatly benefitted from Lerika’s project management skills and experience and her dedication and efficiency are truly remarkable. Thank You very much, Lerika, for always being available as a sounding board and source of sound advice. On behalf of Case (and in fact Chris) I am looking forward to more of the same in the year(s) ahead.

In conclusion I have two requests to all Council Members and Appointees, with particular reference to Centre Chairs and outreach-oriented entities:

1. Please promote the purchase and use of the Sky Guide at all the schools you come into contact with. They do have so-called LSTM (“Learning Skills & Teaching Material”) funds available and ASSA will provide a brief guide on how to effectively use this wonderful resource.

Struik has kindly agreed to sell these at a 50% discount to the retail price of R140.00, with a 60% discount if we can generate another 1,000 orders. The word “Schools” must just be included in the order.

2. Please seriously consider holding workshops for the science teachers in your areas, using existing and very simple but extremely effective material that Case Rijdsdijk developed while he was still working. The Solar System and Sundials are the first two to be used in the Overberg and were very successful. Once teachers realise that they have been empowered with the material and methodology to conduct the same workshops at their own

schools it's very rewarding to see the "light bulbs switching on". They have also confirmed that the workshops did help to teach the subject more effectively.

I visited both the Durban and Midlands Centres last week and I am optimistic that both will use this powerful resource.

All the material used by the Hermanus Centre will be made available to anyone willing to agree to this request.

Thank you in anticipation for your cooperation in this regard.

I thank you for your kind attention.

Pierre de Villiers

I have a few more duties to perform: First of all a word of thanks to the SAAO for the use of this venue, which must be regarded as a first choice for an ASSA AGM. Secondly Thanks You Eddy Nijeboer and the other members of the Cape Centre committee for all your arrangements regarding this event. Last but not least Thank You to everyone present this evening for your attendance, which contributed significantly towards making it a memorable occasion.

My final duty as President of the Society is to formally and ceremoniously hand over the baton of the Presidency to Case Rijdsijk. We suggest that you keep it on your desk to serve as a daily reminder of both the confidence and trust that Council has in your leadership, as well as the accountability that comes with the position.

Congratulations, Mr President! May your term be enjoyable and successful.