



USIYA10-01

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Beyond IYA2009: U.S. Legacy Includes Telescope Kit, Dark-Skies Awareness, New Media and Image Exhibitions

Although the International Year of Astronomy 2009 (IYA2009) comes to a formal close this weekend with a ceremony in Padua, Italy, numerous core programs conducted during the year will carry on in 2010 and beyond, including many led by educators and outreach professionals in the United States and elsewhere in North America.

“Thanks to the support of the National Science Foundation, NASA, the American Astronomical Society and the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, as well as the hard work of hundreds of volunteers, we were able to conduct a vigorous, fun and wide-ranging set of programs and events throughout 2009,” says Douglas Isbell, the U.S. Single Point of Contact (SPoC) for IYA2009. “We are thrilled that so many of these efforts will continue to grow, mature, and morph into new projects in the years ahead.”

The United States contributed to the leadership of a half-dozen cornerstone projects for IYA2009—in particular, the Galileoscope hands-on telescope kit, a wide variety of dark-skies outreach activities, the reproducible image exhibition known as “From Earth to the Universe,” several creative interactive Web sites and New Media programs, and two global star party weekends.

More than 110,000 of the low-cost, high-quality Galileoscopes have been sold and delivered in 96 countries (including 6,000 donated to developing nations), and another 70,000 are in production. Thanks to a recent \$250,000 donation from Ric and Jean Edelman, 15,000 Galileoscopes and related training will be provided to U.S. teachers across the country.

Offered initially at a price of \$15 for single orders, the cost of individual kits will increase from \$20 to \$30 on January 11, when the project is handed over from its founding volunteer staff to an educational products company. In total, the Galileoscope project succeeded beyond all but the wildest expectations of its founding group.

“The ambitious idea of an inexpensive telescope that could be reproduced in large numbers for use around the world was a unanimous goal of IYA2009 coordinators when we all met in Germany in early 2007, and three years later we’re extremely proud of what’s been achieved,” says Rick Fienberg, chair of the IYA2009 Galileoscope Task Group and currently the press officer for the American Astronomical Society.

“The kit-based aspect of the Galileoscope has proven to have strong educational value, and we look forward to many years of teacher workshops and interested individuals using to help them observe the same inspiring objects in the night sky that Galileo saw four-hundred years ago,” says Stephen Pompea, manager of science education at the National Optical Astronomy Observatory (NOAO) in Tucson, AZ, and chair of the U.S. IYA2009 Telescope Kits and Optics Challenges Working Group. Other key contributors to the success of the Galileoscope include Douglas Arion of Carthage College, Tom Smith of Merit Models, and Photon Engineering in Tucson.

IYA2009 fostered a variety of programs to encourage people around the world to enjoy and protect the darkness of their local night skies as a shared resource for all, building in large part upon previous successes coordinated by NOAO, the Tucson-based International Dark-Sky Association and the U.S. national park system.

More than 20,000 measurements of the night sky around the globe were made by citizen scientists during IYA2009, along with the distribution and use of 400 dark-skies education kits, and a variety of creative events, podcasts, photo contests, artistic posters, school presentations and legislative declarations designed to preserve dark skies in local communities and regions.

“The emotional peak of the year for me was probably the 3,400 GLOBE at Night measurements made by one school district in Indiana, which they then visualized using Lego blocks,” says Connie Walker of NOAO, chair of the U.S. and international Dark-Skies Awareness working groups, which included several dozen contributors from around the world. “New programs like the Dark-Sky Rangers, and further editions of star-counting programs such as GLOBE at Night, will help ensure continued attention to the common concerns of environment, economics, science and health that drive this multidisciplinary topic.”

The idea of capitalizing on the amazing visual appeal of many astronomical images was another clear goal for IYA2009, brought to reality by a team led by Kimberly Kowal Arcand and Megan Watzke of the Chandra X-ray Center in Cambridge, MA. The NASA-sponsored “From Earth to the Universe” (FETTU) project enabled more than 500 exhibits of the most beautiful and inspiring large-format astronomical images in nearly 70 countries, including 35 U.S. cities. In the U.S., many of the exhibits were funded by a NASA grant.

“We’re particularly thrilled with the FETTU exhibitions held in non-traditional locations, such as a hallway in the parliament of Iran and a prison in Portugal, and the fact that the images were displayed on every continent but Antarctica,” Arcand says.

FETTU will continue in many forms, including transfer of installations at the Atlanta and Chicago O’Hare international airports to local hospitals. A few remarkable new images released in 2009 (and their related captions) are being added to the online collection, and a “FETTU swap” of used exhibits that remain in good condition is being organized.

Several world-leading IYA2009 programs in New Media managed in the U.S. will continue, such as the “365 Days of Astronomy” podcast and the “Astronomy 2009”

island in Second Life, many under the banner of a new non-profit organization called Astrosphere New Media led by IYA2009 New Media Task Group Chair Pamela Gay. “Through IYA2009, we have built a community of content creators,” Gay says. “Thanks to projects like ‘365 Days of Astronomy,’ literally hundreds of voices have found a new way to communicate not just their astronomy content, but also their passion. With Astrosphere, we will be able to keep this community growing and working daily to tell the story of astronomy.”

A month-long repeat of the successful 2009 global star parties “100 Hours of Astronomy” and “Galilean Nights,” with new twists, will be held in April 2010 under the leadership of the group Astronomers Without Borders. The greatest attendance reported at any “100 Hours” event in the U.S. was more than 9,000 at an event with 22 telescopes for public viewing at a U.S. Naval Observatory open house in Washington, DC. Next was the Virginia Living Museum with 5,000-plus people attending a variety of events including observing night and day, planetarium programs and family campouts over the four days. There were 18 events in the US with reported attendance of 500 or more, all of which had telescope viewing.

Overall, many engaged and committed volunteers used the major themes of IYA2009 to conduct yearlong outreach efforts in their local communities. Jason Kendall hosted over 3,000 people at telescope star parties in New York City parks; the Village of Barrington Hills, Illinois, used IYA2009 to gather support for a lighting ordinance to save energy and protect dark skies; Donald Lubowich created a Galileo float for a Columbus Day parade and promoted astronomy at many musical events; and, observatory outreach specialists in Hilo, Hawaii, produced a special newspaper issue devoted to astronomy.

From its conception, the U.S. IYA program was conceived as a North American effort, with active coordination between the central NSF-funded program and the projects supported by NASA (where Hashima Hasan served as the IYA Single Point of Contact), along with regular communications with national IYA2009 nodes in Canada, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.

The “Visions of the Universe” traveling exhibit of NASA images was hosted by libraries in 55 small towns and large cities, with more than 72,000 visitors to date. Two multiwavelength images from NASA’s Great Observatories were displayed by 152 science centers and museums, with related synergistic events that attracted more than 15,000 attendees and counting.

NASA IYA Student Ambassadors has engaged college students in all 50 states to spread the excitement of NASA astronomy to their local neighborhoods and beyond. NASA’s “Afterschool Universe” provided IYA2009-related training to community-based organizations, while pre-launch teacher workshops associated with the Kepler and WISE missions engaged educators in the science of these missions.

President Barack Obama and the First Family hosted an IYA2009 star party on the White House lawn in October. “NASA’s IYA2009 programs clearly captured the imagination of the public and will continue to keep it engaged in the scientific exploration of the Universe,” Hasan says.

More than 1.3 million Canadians enjoyed a “Galileo Moment” of personal astronomical discovery by participating in one of the more than 3,500 events throughout the country during 2009, more than 30 percent over their national goal. IYA2009 helped strengthen relations between the three societies representing amateur and professional astronomers in Canada, according to national SPoC James Hesser. Other legacies include newly collected astronomy stories from Aboriginal communities, new outreach materials in English and French, a \$30 commemorative coin, and a pair of postal stamps.

Puerto Rico held numerous public events and star parties each month during 2009. More than 45,000 people participated or were impacted by these events, which included the two cornerstone projects “100 Hours of Astronomy” (in which Puerto Rico received the Award of “Most Registered Events by a Single Group”) and FETTU. Puerto Rico followed with great interest and emotion the flight of the first Puerto Rican astronaut, Joseph Acaba, during the STS-119 Space Shuttle mission in March 2009, according to national SPoC Carmen Pantoja. During June and December, Acaba and fellow astronaut Steven Swanson visited Puerto Rico and spoke to thousands of interested people in several locations across the island.

Formal education efforts via the IYA2009 Galileo Teacher Training Program will continue nationally through the involvement and support of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific.

To learn more and to join in future events and programs, visit some of these Web sites:

www.astronomy2009.org
www.astronomy2009.us (soon to become www.beyond2009.us)
www.galileoscope.org
www.darkskiesawareness.org
www.fromearthtotheuniverse.org
www.astrosphere.org
www.astronomerswithoutborders.org

Contacts:

Douglas Isbell
U.S. Single-Point-of-Contact for IYA2009
Phone: 520-991-0380
Email: disbell@astronomy2009.us

Pedro Russo
IYA2009 Coordinator
ESO ePOD, Garching, Germany
Phone: +49 89 320 06 195
Cell: +49 176 6110 0211
Email: prusso@eso.org

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