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International Year of Astronomy 2009 raises millions of eyes to the skies

1 July 2009, Paris: As the International Year of Astronomy 2009 (IYA2009) reaches its six-month milestone, over a million people have already looked at the sky through a telescope for the first time, and even more have newly engaged in astronomy. This is only the tip of iceberg, as countless ongoing projects and planned initiatives indicate that the IYA2009 is well on the way towards achieving many of its goals.

UNESCO and the International Astronomical Union (IAU) launched 2009 as the International Year of Astronomy under the theme "The Universe, Yours to Discover". The IYA2009 is a global celebration of astronomy and its contributions to society and culture, with events at national, regional and global levels throughout the whole of 2009. Now, halfway through 2009, much has been achieved and even more can be expected in the future.

The Galileoscope project headlines the IYA2009. With the aim of providing low-cost telescopes that offer views far better than those obtained by Galileo Galilei some 400 years ago, the venture has picked up significant pace since the IYA2009 began. By the end of July, the first 60 000 Galileoscopes will have been shipped, and a further 100 000 are currently in production. More than 4000 Galileoscopes have been generously donated by the IYA2009 and individuals to organisations and schools in developing countries. This gesture aptly demonstrates the commitment of astronomy enthusiasts to the IYA2009 goal of making the skies accessible to all.

But perhaps the most impressive figures for the IYA2009 have come from the national activities that have brought together hundreds of thousands of people in many countries for astronomy-themed events. For example, more than 400 000 people gathered for the Sunrise Event on New Year's Day in Busan City, South Korea. In Brazil, the 2009 Brazilian Olympiad of Astronomy and Astronautics saw more than 750 000 students participate from 32 500 schools. In Paraguay, the IYA2009 launch featured a concert with more than 1600 musicians and an audience of over 15 000. In Norway, every student from grades 5–11 will soon receive a free astronomy kit, including a Galileoscope and an educational guide. For the first time in postal service history, and in just six months, more than 70 postal agencies around the world have issued over 140 new stamps inspired by astronomy.

IAU President Catherine Cesarsky says, "*It's amazing to see just how far the International Year of Astronomy 2009 has progressed over the last six months. The hard work put in by professional and amateur astronomers is making the IYA2009's theme, 'The Universe, Yours to Discover' a reality.*"

The many other signature events of the IYA2009 have further enabled astronomy enthusiasts to share their excitement. In April, the highly anticipated 100 Hours of Astronomy extravaganza kicked off. This planet-wide celebration involved over 100 countries and

thousands of events, with more than two million people taking part in observing events. Widely regarded as an outstanding success, 100 Hours of Astronomy brought people from all seven continents together with the help of a live 24-hour webcast called "Around the World in 80 Telescopes". This groundbreaking broadcast was watched by over 150 000 individuals.

Astronomical images have the power to inspire people to think about our place in the Universe, a fact used by From Earth To The Universe (FETTU), a project to run exhibitions in unusual locations around the world, like train stations and shopping malls. So far, over 60 countries around the world have signed up to host FETTU exhibitions in more than 200 separate locations.

Dark Skies Awareness is an ongoing initiative to combat light pollution and raise awareness of the importance of deep darkness for appreciating and studying the cosmos. As part of this effort, the GLOBE At Night project encourages members of the public to become citizen scientists by performing star-counts and reporting their findings. The 2009 campaign, held this March, garnered 15 700 measurements, nearly 80 percent more than the previous record in 2007.

The Cosmic Diary Cornerstone project continues to flourish. Professional scientists are blogging about their lives and work, giving the public an insight into what it is really like to be a researcher. Since its launch on 1 January 2009, the Cosmic Diary has recruited 60 professional astronomers from 28 countries. There have been over 1000 blog posts, attracting more than 97 000 visitors.

Further impressive web statistics are provided by the Portal To The Universe (PTTU), a global, one-stop clearinghouse for online astronomy content. The PTTU serves as an index and aggregator for astronomy content for laypeople, press, educators, decision-makers, scientists and more. During its first two months of operation, the PTTU has featured more than 2500 press releases, almost 1500 podcast episodes, 10 000 blog posts and received almost 100 000 visitors.

Universe Awareness (UNAWA) is an international outreach initiative that uses the beauty and scale of the Universe to inspire very young children in underprivileged environments. To date, programmes have been organised in 30 countries, producing many hundreds of educational resources. For example, in Tunisia more than 40 000 children have participated in UNAWA activities since January 2009.

The Cornerstone project Developing Astronomy Globally (DAG) has surveyed the status of astronomy research and education in more than 45 countries. To support projects and activities in developing regions, the IYA2009 provided seed funding for development initiatives coordinated via DAG. Proposals from the following countries have been selected: Nepal, Uganda, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Gabon, Rwanda, Uruguay, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Tajikistan. More global educational activities come courtesy of the Galileo Teacher Training Program, which is running workshops in 25 countries.

Astronomical heritage is a strong theme running through the IYA2009. The IAU's Working Group on Astronomy and World Heritage, along with the International Council on Monuments and Sites, has begun the first Thematic Study in any field of science heritage. The results of the study will be reported to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, bringing the protection and preservation of important astronomy sites to the world's attention. The

Thematic Study's findings will also form the basis for developing specific guidelines for UNESCO member states on the inscription of astronomical properties.

It is fitting that cutting-edge astronomical research is reaching new heights in 2009. The IYA2009 logo and motto was proudly displayed on the Ariane 5 rocket that sent two forefront space observatories into space in May: ESA's Herschel and Planck flagship missions. Herschel, the largest-ever infrared space telescope, will study the birth and evolution of stars and galaxies. Planck will measure tiny fluctuations in the relic radiation from the Big Bang, opening the way for theories that can more fully describe the origin of the Universe. These two space missions are set to break new ground in Astronomy. Also in May, astronauts performed repairs and equipped the NASA/ESA Hubble Space Telescope with the latest in instrument technology. To honour the IYA2009, astronaut Mike Massimino took onboard with him a replica of Galileo's telescope as well as an IYA2009 flag.

Although IYA2009's achievements to date are certainly impressive, it has only reached its halfway point and many new initiatives are in the works. For example, 23-24 October will see the launch of Galilean Nights, the follow-up to the highly successful 100 Hours of Astronomy presentation. *"Events such as this, in conjunction with ongoing projects, will ensure that the IYA2009 sprints to the finish, and will leave a legacy that lasts long into the future,"* says Cesarsky.

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Links

- Official IYA2009 website: <http://www.astronomy2009.org/>
- 100 Hours of Astronomy website: <http://www.100hoursofastronomy.org/>
- Around the World in 80 Telescopes archive:
<http://www.100hoursofastronomy.org/component/webcast/webcast/6>
- Galileoscope website: <http://www.galileoscope.org/>
- From Earth To The Universe website: <http://www.fromearthtotheuniverse.org/>
- Dark Skies Awareness website: <http://www.darkskiesawareness.org/>
- Cosmic Diary website: <http://www.cosmicdiary.org/>
- Portal To The Universe website: <http://www.portaltotheuniverse.org/>
- Universe Awareness website: <http://www.unawe.org/>
- Developing Astronomy Globally website: <http://www.developingastronomy.org/>
- Astronomy and World Heritage website:
<http://www.astronomy2009.org/globalprojects/cornerstones/astroworldheritage/>
- Galilean Nights website: <http://www.galileannights.org>

Notes

The vision of the IYA2009 is to help the citizens of the world rediscover their place in the Universe through the day and night-time skies the impact of astronomy and basic sciences on our daily lives, and understand better how scientific knowledge can contribute to a more equitable and peaceful society.

The aim of the IYA2009 is to stimulate worldwide interest, especially among young people, in astronomy and science under the central theme, "The Universe, Yours to Discover". IYA2009 events and activities will promote a greater appreciation of the inspirational aspects of astronomy that embody an invaluable shared resource for all countries.

The IYA2009 activities are taking place at the global and regional levels, and especially at the national and local levels. National Nodes in each state have been formed to prepare activities

for 2009. These Nodes establish collaborations between professional and amateur astronomers, science centres, educators and science communicators in preparing activities for 2009. The International Year of Astronomy was proclaimed by the United Nations on 20 December 2007.

The IAU is the international astronomical organisation that brings together almost 10 000 distinguished astronomers from all nations of the world. Its mission is to promote and safeguard the science of astronomy in all its aspects through international cooperation. The IAU also serves as the internationally recognised authority for assigning designations to celestial bodies and the surface features on them. Founded in 1919, the IAU is the world's largest professional body for astronomers.

For more information

Pedro Russo
IAU IYA2009 Coordinator
ESO ePOD, Garching, Germany
Tel: +49 89 320 06 195
Cellular: +49 176 6110 0211
Fax: +49 89 320 23 62
E-mail: prusso@eso.org

Further contacts

Yolanda Berenguer
UNESCO Focal Point for the International Year of Astronomy 2009
UNESCO HQ, Paris
Tel: +33 1 45684171
E-mail: y.berenguer@unesco.org

Dr. Karel A. van der Hucht
General Secretary, International Astronomical Union
IAU Secretariat, Paris, France
Tel: +33 1 43 25 83 58
E-mail: K.A.van.der.Hucht@sron.nl

Lars Lindberg Christensen
IAU Press Officer
ESO ePOD, Garching, Germany
Tel: +49 89 3200 6761
Cellular: +49 173 3872 621
E-mail: lars@eso.org