

Astronomy Outreach in Greece and the prospects for the IYA2009

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Abstract

We present a short overview of astronomy outreach activities in Greece and the profiles of the organisations involved. Furthermore, we present the capabilities and potential of these organisations for their involvement in IYA2009.

Introduction

Until the last decade of the 20th century astronomy had remained a purely academic subject since the modern Greek state was established in 1827. Although the National Observatory of Athens was established in 1842 and the Department of Astronomy has been active since the foundation of Athens University in 1837, there was no major interest in disseminating astronomy to the public. A few early attempts, such as the Astronomical Society of Greece in 1926 in Corfu and the Greek Astronomical Society in 1957 in Athens, had no major social impact in the then international or national political conditions. However the public has always been fascinated by the “mysteries of the Universe”.

In the early 1990s, social conditions in Greece were more favourable than ever for developing public interest in astronomy because:

- Greece had not faced warfare or severe external threats for more than forty years.
- Democracy was secured after the fall of the military regime in 1974.
- Private wealth had increased dramatically.
- Greece became a full member of the European Union, a fact that opened the market for astronomical equipment and allowed the free flow of information.

The development of information technology along with the rise of the internet era and the operation of privately owned radio stations and, most importantly, television media also gave a boost to public interest in astronomy, providing tools and media to communicate science with visual and hands-on methods as never before.

Thus, today we face a tremendous increase in public interest in astronomy in Greece, which has triggered the establishment of outreach organisations, which will be presented below.

Outreach organisations and facilities

Planetariums

- Eugenides Planetarium (350,000 visitors per year). This planetarium belongs to the Eugenides Foundation, which has provided valuable education services to Greek society since the early fifties. Under its huge dome (25 metres) there are projectors for full-dome video and film shows and a Digistar planetarium projector.
- Planetarium at the Technological Museum at Thessaloniki (80,000 visitors per year). The science museum at Thessaloniki operates a planetarium with 75 seats and is equipped with an RSA projector.

Visitor Centres (VC)

- Penteli Observatory. The National Observatory of Athens has operated an active Visitor Centre at Penteli Observatory since 1994. An old 25-inch refractor and various smaller telescopes for solar and stellar observations are used for public viewing and training students and amateur astronomers. The facility also has a lecture hall with 130 seats. The VC is open from Monday to Friday for elementary and secondary schools during the academic year and six nights per month for the public. It also organises seminars at various levels on a regular basis.
- Kryonerion Observatory. The site is 120 km south of Athens and belongs to the National Observatory of Athens. It is equipped with a 48-inch Cassegrain. The site is open for the public one night per month during the summer. It also provides support to amateur astronomers.
- Skinakas Observatory. The observatory belongs to the University of Crete. It has various research optical telescopes — the largest being a 50-inch Ritchey–Chrétien reflector. The site is open to the public every weekend during the summer.
- University of Athens Observatory. The laboratory of Astrophysics of the University of Athens operates a 16-inch robotic telescope on its campus. The telescope is open to the public one night per month while public lectures are given regularly.
- University of Thessaloniki Observatory. The Department of Astronomy maintains some small telescopes that are regularly open to the public on the university campus. The department has significant outreach activity in the mass media.

Public Observatories

- Larisa Observatory. This public observatory was established in 1984 in Larisa, a major city in central Greece. It belongs to the municipality of Larisa and it has important local outreach activities.
- Zagori Observatory. This small observatory is in a small village 54 km from the major city of Ioannina, Epirus in the northwest of the country. It is a private institution established in 2005. It is open to the public during the summer, and organises schools and seminars for amateurs on a regular basis.

Amateur astronomy

There are now 12 amateur astronomy societies all over the country with about 3000 active members in total. Their distribution covers almost the entire country. An analysis of the profile of Greek amateur astronomy societies by Dimopoulos and Matsopoulos (2007) shows that they concentrate mostly on outreach and informal education activities, by organising numerous seminars, lectures, open nights, star parties and sidewalk activities. They also maintain highly informative websites and publish bulletins and magazines with educational content. They act as the major task force for astronomy dissemination in Greek society.

Another study of the profile of the Greek amateur astronomer by Matsopoulos (2007) shows that most are young (56.2% < 40 years old), male (75%) and well-educated (48.3% have a university degree and another 25% are students). These results show that these amateurs have the capacity to provide high quality public outreach and informal education.

Although the scientific contribution of all these amateurs is nominal, there are two emerging groups where they are engaged in real science, making scientific observations of variable stars and other astronomical phenomena. These two groups are acting as catalysts between the amateurs and the scientific community by providing hands-on scientific activities and disseminating scientific methodology.

Prospects for IYA2009

Although there are discussions between all those mentioned above, to plan and arrange simultaneous activities all over the country during the International Year of Astronomy (IYA), no decisions or fixed arrangements have been made as yet. But, in a business as usual approach, we can assume that both institutions and amateurs will accept the challenge and arrange numerous open nights for the public, sidewalk activities, star parties, lectures, special planetarium shows, inserts in major newspapers and presentations to the mass media during the IYA2009.

References

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