



Astronomers Without Borders: A Global Astronomy Community

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Abstract

Astronomers Without Borders (AWB) brings together astronomy enthusiasts of all types – amateur astronomers, educators, professionals and “armchair” astronomers for a variety of online and physical-world programs. The AWB web site provides social networking and a base for online programs that engage people worldwide in astronomy activities that transcend geopolitical and cultural borders. There is universal interest in astronomy, which has been present in all cultures throughout recorded history. Astronomy is also among the most accessible of sciences with the natural laboratory of the sky being available to people worldwide. There are few other interests for which people widely separated geographically can engage in activities involving the same objects. AWB builds on those advantages to bring people together. AWB also provides a platform where projects can reach a global audience. AWB also provides unique opportunities for multi-disciplinary collaboration in EPO programs. Several programs including The World at Night, Global Astronomy Month and others will be described along with lessons learned.

1. Founding and Rationale

Personal experiences during travel to diverse cultural regions, and introducing the people and similar practices found in astronomy, led to the conclusion that astronomy bridged geopolitical and cultural divides, people-to-people, in ways that other fields did not. Founded in 2007 to bring astronomy enthusiasts together through online programs in greater numbers, AWB began by introducing clubs to each other. The International Year of Astronomy 2009 (IYA2009) provided additional opportunities when the AWB founder co-chaired the 100 Hours of Astronomy Cornerstone Project (100HA) in which a global star party was created in a fashion similar to what had been envisioned within AWB for the future. The high profile of IYA2009 and the success of

100HA provided many lessons in global programs in astronomy that engage amateur astronomers and other enthusiasts in direct participation and sharing of activities. The worldwide network of amateur astronomers was incorporated into AWB after 100HA to build upon that success.

2. Global Astronomy Month

To continue the enthusiasm generated by 100HA and the demand for more such programs, Global Astronomy Month 2010 was launched in April 2010, one year after 100HA, as an annual celebration of astronomy. The entire month was designated as a time to celebrate astronomy based on lessons learned during 100HA. Having an entire month available allowed clubs to schedule events for more convenient times based on cultural and social realities in their own country, as well as providing time for events that were delayed due to weather to be rescheduled. More importantly, it allowed for additional programs to be scheduled that might take more than a few days to conduct including contests and observational programs. This was found to be very important in allowing for partnerships between organizations and the development of unique multi-disciplinary programs that previously had had no other home to take shape. The success of GAM 2010 led to an expanded GAM 2011 in which partnership programs with other organizations – primarily initiated by organizations outside of AWB that took advantage of AWB’s resources and strengths – were expanded by a factor of four. The experience of GAM 2011, in addition to showing the need for this type of global celebration – a desire created, presumably, by the hugely successful IYA2009 -- has provided critical lesson that are being incorporated into planning for GAM 2012.

3. Collaborative Programs

The ability to create collaborative programs in a flexible environment in which partners bring their own strengths and benefit from the resources of other partners – making programs available that were previously very difficult to create – is an unexpected benefit of the creation of AWB. Thus AWB provides infrastructure and a social network while ideas are generated from throughout the astronomy community. Many grass-roots programs that had not previously been conceived have been created by active AWB participants.