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My own connection with the Starlight Initiative stems first of all from my long and fruitful association with Francisco Sánchez as colleagues from 1981 when the Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias was establishing the Observatory on La Palma. As Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory I was constructing the United Kingdom optical telescopes on that remarkable site among the international group of facilities. That in itself tells a tale. The RGO originated outside London in 1675. In the 1950s pollution drove it to the south of England where it was re-established on the estate of Herstmonceux Castle. And in the 1980s the observational centre of the RGO had to move once again, now to the pristine site on La Palma where new, more advanced telescopes could be truly exploited for world-class astronomy. With this history, of critical importance is the now long established astronomical protection of La Palma through a specific law that demands appropriate measures to preserve sky quality.

Astronomy is thought by many to be a science without earthly relevance. It is seen as a pursuit of those with their gaze in the sky and their head in the clouds - an esoteric indulgence given only to astronomers. This is far from a true picture. Indeed it can be said that we all own the sky; and there is much more at stake here than at face value. This is well demonstrated by the vision and the diverse topics of the Starlight conference and the importance of the debate it has catalysed with its overlying emphasis on the fragility of the environment on earth.

Astronomy's broad appeal, whether on practical premises (for example, navigation) or mystical (the hopeful art of the astrologer) or on its cultural interest (our place in the Universe), is well recorded in history from ancient to modern times. Today, astronomy is seen foremost as the foundation of science. Explaining the structure and phenomena observed in the sky inspired Newton and Einstein to make their fundamental discoveries whose universality fundamentally changed our understanding of the natural world. Thus our growing knowledge in science has come about from studies both in earthly laboratories and of physical phenomena observed in the laboratory of the sky.

With modern instruments it is possible to explore the vast panorama of the Universe up to such great distances that light from these regions has taken most of the age of the

Universe to reach us. This shows us that the entire make-up of the Universe that we now see as the galaxies of stars and the gaseous intergalactic space has been evolving over most of time, from a smooth structural beginning that we understand was in the form of a rapidly expanding uniform medium of extraordinarily high density and temperature, to the vast, diffuse and clumpy network of which we are part today. It is also evident that the Universe at large contains only a few percent of the familiar matter that constitutes the galaxies of stars and with these ourselves and is overwhelmingly dominated by the presence of the so-called dark matter and dark energy. The first gravitationally has pulled in the normal matter in the expanding Universe and enabled it to coalesce into the galaxies; the second acts in opposition to gravity and has begun to reverse the expected progressive deceleration with time from the Big Bang. Although the evidence for these comes from sophisticated observations with telescopes and instruments such as those operating on La Palma, both components are still mysterious and their existence is understood only from indications of their influence such as on the spatial clustering and the collective motions of the observed galaxies. There is much yet to discover through the use of large telescopes under unpolluted skies.

Because of the diversity of the Universe in space and time, astronomers need to apply the entire accumulated knowledge in the physical sciences to gain understanding of its properties; and in turn, their discoveries continually push the boundaries of scientific knowledge. Furthermore, the technical challenges of achieving ever more versatile and accurate instrumentation and detectors for observational analysis, and the building of ever larger telescope structures to receive light from the faintest objects, gives astronomy an important catalytic role in advancing technical innovation and expertise. The practise of astronomy therefore has wide influence on the advance both of science and of technology.

Science as a whole seems to have become less appealing at university level. This is of greatest concern in the case of physics, the most fundamental science, which underpins all of the scientific disciplines as well as engineering and technology. Herein enters astronomy, which embodies the broadest imaginable application of physics. Astronomy has wide public appeal and remains attractive to students. Consequently many university physics departments have introduced astronomy-oriented courses to increase the student intake. Postgraduate courses in astronomy also are highly sought-after. More than most research endeavours in scientific subjects, these courses equip students with broad, modern, scientific, technical and computational skills that are widely applicable in industry and commerce as well as, for example, for critical work in environmental sciences.

On top of these considerations, astronomy is a subject that naturally promotes partnership and cooperation internationally: the same goals in understanding are sought; common data-bases are accumulated and accessed, often very wide-ranging and given “Virtual Observatory” status; telescope facilities commonly are made open to international guest observers; and international cooperation in construction and operation of major new facilities for astronomy is becoming ever more necessary.

My second link with the Starlight Initiative comes through UNESCO and in particular from involvement in its natural and social science programmes with which I have spent much of my recent time. UNESCO is an organisation devoted to development of the global good through its mandated disciplines of education, science and culture as well as communication. Of critical importance is its associated operational assets offered by Member States of UNESCO. In such context La Palma is designated under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme as one of the 507 coordinated biosphere reserves currently recognised in 102 countries. With its "360 degrees" synergetic vision bringing together issues of the environment, natural resources, basic sciences and socio-economic advance, La Palma is a unique model for promotion of important aspects of sustainable conservation and development.

The importance of the introduction of the Starlight Initiative by Francisco Sánchez with the Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias and its highly innovative development by Cipriano Marin and his team are most impressively demonstrated in these proceedings. This brilliant beginning augers well for the ongoing action already planned and is a sure inspiration to mounting global efforts on planetary awareness.

