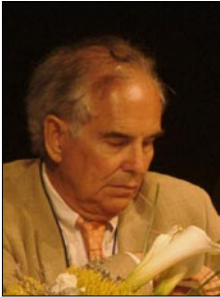




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To be able to contemplate the starry skies at night without the polluted fog of artificial lights masking the countless shining pin-heads dotted over the heavens and, as a result, enjoy the night sky is a marvel that escapes an increasing number of people. Yet this is something that we all deserve and probably need. This thinking, curious and exploring species to which we belong has evolved by gazing at the heavens and by questioning. We recognise that what we are is written above, up there in the mysterious universe that palpitates spectacularly, as poets and wise men have always maintained. All cultures have been interested in knowing

what we are, where we come from and where we are going; and astrophysics approaches such important questions using slow, but sure scientific methods.

The Canary Islands are privileged for many reasons, one being the purity and stability of the atmosphere among the peaks, which has moved astrophysicists from all over the world to place the most advanced telescopes there. Modern astronomy still needs to observe the firmament from the few places on earth where these conditions exist. The island of La Palma is a very special biosphere reserve, since its skies are already protected by a specific law, the so-called “Sky Law”, which has also turned the island into an “astronomic reserve”, open to scientists and astronomy lovers from all over the world. This law is something that should be exported.

But dark nights are not only needed by science and for human enjoyment; many animals and plants also require an unpolluted night sky in order to live.

These ideas encouraged the Astrophysics Institute of the Canary Islands (IAC) to arrange an international meeting of experts in the various fields involved, with the purpose of seeking interconnections and of arriving at an overall view of the problems in hand. And thanks to the ideas and expertise of people like Cipriano Marín and Luís Martínez, and the enthusiastic support from La Palma Biosphere Reserve, it wasn't long before we were joined by UNESCO, the Spanish Government, the Canary Islands Government, La Palma Island Council, the World Tourism Organisation, the European Parliament, most United Nations conventions and programmes linked to the conservation of nature and the environment (CBD, CMS-PNUMA, Ramsar Convention), the MaB Programme, the European Landscape Convention, as well as institutions and organisations from more than thirty countries. And the result of all this was a series of successful, lively, productive and warm meetings held in Santa Cruz de la Palma, made possible

thanks to the people and institutions of the island of La Palma.

The aim was to summarise the conclusions of a “Declaration about the defence of the night sky and the right to starlight”, which was signed by the participants and many island residents, in a highly moving public event, with music by Maestro Coviella composed especially for the occasion. And 20 April was put forward as an annual world “Starlight Night” when outdoor lighting would be reduced all over the planet.

But the most important result is that there will be continuity. The conclusions of “La Palma Declaration” will become a UNESCO initiative, which has been joined by international, national and local organisations. The objective is:

- To reinforce everybody’s right to contemplate the skies.
- To demand the efficient use of resources to preserve nocturnal ecosystems.
- To encourage the introduction of responsible and pro-scientific tourism.
- To protect the astronomical quality of exceptional places destined for scientific observation of the universe.
- To include the above in strategies for environmental protection and energy saving of organisations and governments.

In short, the aim is to contribute to the creation of planetary awareness and to encourage humans—all space travellers from this planet called Earth—to reach a common planetary commitment to preserve the Earth from the serious damage that we ourselves are inflicting upon it.