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Humanity's quest to link its destiny to cosmic signs and patterns began quite early in the evolution of culture. Star gazing was a past time among the ancients. They were awed by the serenity and beauty of a clear night sky; and interpreted constellations and arrangements of stars and planets that they saw in the night sky to have specific meaning for themselves and their endeavours.

In the last four decades the world has become increasingly attuned to the problems of the environment. However, light pollution, and more specifically the pollution of the night sky, was not high on the global, regional, national or local agendas of priority environmental problems. But as climate change and its consequences stoke the imagination of innovators, scientists and engineers in the search for adaptations, issues such as the quality of the lighting in special environments like that in the La Palma Biosphere Reserve of Spain is beginning to attract attention of specialists and the public.

The La Palma Biosphere Reserve of Spain is a unique place; it is one of the few globally valued locations, and others are known from Chile and Hawaii, not only for viewing stars that are visible to the naked eye. It is an observation and study platform for astrophysics and is home to more than 10 sophisticated telescopes that peer deep and several light years into the cosmos to study, understand and disseminate knowledge on the evolution and the future of planetary systems. The clear night sky of La Palma is a necessary condition for the practice of the science of astrophysics; the engineering and technology investments worth millions of dollars would not have poured into the La Palma Biosphere Reserve without the explicit commitment of the island's management to sustain this high-quality night sky for the benefit of current and future generations.

La Palma Biosphere Reserve, a haven for tourists in search of a natural environment and recreational opportunities has directed its infrastructure development to take full cognizance of the necessity to sustain the high-quality of the night-sky for astrophysics observations and study. A limit is placed on the heights of all buildings; and lighting in public places is required to use energy saving measures and direct illumination downwards to the ground leaving the night-sky unaffected and preserved for starlight viewing. This compromise that the La Palma Biosphere Reserve authorities accepted in the development of the island as a tourist destination and their dedication to spread the knowledge about the starlight phenomenon beyond the scientific community to the

global public are good illustrations of the functions of biosphere reserves designated under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme.

There are currently 507 biosphere reserves recognized in 102 Member States of UNESCO. Each of them is dedicated to defining, establishing and sustaining context-specific conservation and development equations such as that illustrated in the La Palma Biosphere Reserve. Most of the UNESCO biosphere reserves, particularly in less developed countries are faced with difficult choices and trade-offs between their environmental and development goals. Investments into sustaining environmental values and scientific importance of biosphere reserves in less developed countries that would justify development compromises are not always easily forthcoming.

One important function of UNESCO in co-ordinating the work of biosphere reserves is to ensure that scientists, managers and administrators of biosphere reserves the world over can meet and learn from each other. In this regard, I would like to thank the Government of Spain which has generously offered to host the Third International Conference on Biosphere Reserves in Madrid, Spain from 4 to 9 February 2008 where a large number of the 507 biosphere reserves from the 102 countries will come together to discuss problems and issues pertaining to the governance and management of biosphere reserves. Examples of biosphere reserves that are succeeding in building sustainable conservation and development relationships using science and other knowledge tools will be highlighted at that Conference. La Palma's Starlight initiative will be among the achievements that Spain is likely to highlight at the Madrid Conference in 2008.

The Starlight initiative has already raised interest in other countries which have similar locations with high-quality night skies for observing stars, planets, galaxies and other entities that characterize our and other universes. I welcome and congratulate the La Palma and the Spanish Government authorities for their unique achievement in bringing environmental conservation, scientific study and socio-economic well being of local communities into a sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship. I am certain that the Starlight initiative will increase the attraction of the La Palma Biosphere Reserve to not only to Spanish citizens but also to the international community to visit and learn about the science of astrophysics and its practice as well as the art of balancing and sustaining environmental conservation and socio-economic development objectives in a small island ecosystem.

I wish the management of the La Palma Biosphere Reserve and the promoters of the Starlight initiative all success in their continuing and noble mission.