



MALCOLM SMITH

President, Division XII, International Astronomical Union (IAU)
AURA / CTIO / NOAO



This conference in La Palma is an important step along the road to protecting the natural, night-time environment at an international, national and local level. A perusal of these proceedings shows encouraging signs that the effort is gathering strength, moving beyond the phase initiated primarily by astronomers, to include much wider areas of interest and influence. The formal program and proceedings are, of course, only part of the story. Networking - in the passageways, on strolls around the conference area, on buses and at associated social events - added to the education of us all and is how plans for future actions were being hatched. For example, looking around during a coffee break, I enjoyed seeing a European lawyer chatting with a medical doctor (cancer researcher) from the US. On a bus, others were discussing the next steps in plans to seek designation of a gorgeous natural area of New Zealand as a UNESCO World Heritage Starlight Reserve - i.e. specifically including its pristine starlit skies - to coincide with the International Year of Astronomy in 2009. At the end of the conference dinner, at the side of a large swimming pool, a young, highly-committed Chilean received the distinguished Hoag-Robinson award from the International Dark Sky Association, presented by its European representative from Belgium. No-one came away from this conference without having widened her/his perspective on the issues and their relevance to our world. I predict that within ten years, astronomers will be in the minority at conferences like this - there will be more biologists, medics, lighting engineers, representatives of the eco-tourism industry.... Nevertheless, it is near the large international observatories, in places like La Palma, Hawaii, northern Chile and southern Arizona, that most progress has been made so far. This is probably because of the particularly obvious economic and cultural impact of astronomy at a local level - an average of nearly 1,000 million euros of investment has been collectively committed from many countries to the installations and people in each of these places (~4,000 million in total) - and of the growing investment in (and impact of) the astro-tourism industry, which will also depend on preserving starlit skies. To continue to succeed, we need to continue to identify and carefully communicate areas of genuine mutual benefit.

La Palma proved the perfect place for such a conference. Not only is it a beautiful and continually developing site of world-class, astronomical activity - it is where multidisciplinary activity is already quite obvious at all levels (UNESCO's Biosphere Reserve,

local tourism emphasising protection of the night-time environment, clear commitment from local and national authorities and much more). The timing was good, too, following - by a couple of months - another multidisciplinary conference in Washington, DC, which covered nocturnal environment issues primarily affecting the USA.

On a personal note, it was a thrill to return (twice) to the Roque de los Muchachos after so many years. Having spent 6 months as a consultant at the then Royal Greenwich Observatory in the UK in 1973 (April-September) writing the scientific case (with Professor Redman from Cambridge) for three telescopes which are now located on La Palma, my family and I returned to Chile (which was not entirely straightforward in September 1973) via La Palma. There was no road to the summit, so I hired a taxi in Santa Cruz for the day and went in it to the end of the paved road. From there I hiked (through the fog) to the summit - where it was brilliantly clear. The only observatory structure on the site was a polar, site-seeing telescope. Image quality seemed likely to be good. (In May 2007, a month after this conference, at a meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society in London, we were treated to an unforgettable show of what the active sun looks like through adaptive optics on a Swedish telescope sited on La Palma). Nowadays, the development of modern astronomical facilities on La Palma is maintaining momentum - the current development of Spanish astronomy, Spain's membership of ESO and the contribution of the IAC under Prof. Francisco Sanchez' leadership is particularly impressive. The IAC runs one of the most dynamic groups in the world dedicated to control of light pollution - managed quietly but effectively by Javier Diaz.

It may not be so obvious from these proceedings, but it was clear to all of us who attended - this conference was exceptionally well organized. Things seemed just to happen - smoothly and with style. Nevertheless, conversing with others, it was clear that each of us had been individually looked after by the conference team at La Palma - and that Cipriano Marin had personally taken it upon himself to ensure that each one of us could learn and contribute as much as possible. Not only that, we had fun doing so!

What's next? Far more than can ever be summarised in a short prologue. Cipriano is leading the effort to ensure that actions follow from the conference - please do all you can personally to help, even if you were not at the conference. The world is, for example, once again giving some prominence to the need to use energy more wisely. Light pollution and glare are products of energy waste and lack of understanding of vision. Lighting the bottoms of aeroplanes and birds with city lights is expensive and unnecessary, as well as damaging to the environment (and to astronomy). Lights have been switched off for an hour or so as parts of energy-saving demonstration programmes in Sydney, Paris, London and elsewhere - but how many of the citizens of these emblematic capitals have heard of any link between artificial light and the disappearing, natural, starlit, night sky? We have to reach out to authorities and to the media to ensure participation in these programs and demonstrations, that are being used to educate and to change attitudes to energy wastage, as a step towards more adequate protection of the natural environment. How do we do this successfully?

For more recent news and further background, please visit the Starlight website.