

CAP2013 – Communicating Astronomy with the Public 2013

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Summary

The highly successful and very popular Communicating Astronomy with the Public conference series held its fifth event (CAP2013) at the Copernicus Science Centre and the Warsaw University of Technology in Poland, from 13 to 17 October. This review gives a summary of the event proceedings.

Introduction

The CAP conferences are held under the auspices of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) Commission 55 — Communicating Astronomy with the Public and, following the International Year of Astronomy 2009, the conferences are clearly becoming even more popular. CAP2013 was the best attended so far with around 200 participants, including a large number attending for the first time and there were participants from over 40 countries. CAP intends to bring together the sources of information — primarily astronomers, the mediators — public information specialists, press officers, outreach managers, planetarium producers, and the distributors — astronomers, enthusiasts, science journalists, web-activists and teachers, who contribute to the communication of astronomy with the public.

The IAU provided €10 000 of support for registration/travel/subsistence for participants, half of which was designated to support those attending from the UNAWE international workshop in Heidelberg, held the week before. This initiative is partly responsible for the significant presence of participants from outside Europe.

The conference programme was packed with a range of talks, discussion sessions, a full-dome interactive planetarium session, posters, a tour of the Science Centre, a

Copernicus planetarium show, an evening IMAX cinema preview showing, and last, but by no means least, what turned out to be a very popular “unconference” session.

Conference welcome

The conference began with welcome drinks and nibbles at the Warsaw University of Technology on the Sunday evening and was officially opened on the Monday morning in the grand hall of the institute’s main build-

ing. The delegates were welcomed by local dignitaries and the session was hosted by Lars Lindberg Christensen, President of the IAU Commission 55. Welcoming words were given by: Professor Rajmund Bacewicz, Pro-rector of the Warsaw University of Technology; Robert Firmhofer, Director of the Copernicus Science Centre; Professor Lech Mankiewicz, Chairman of the Advisory Board of the New Space Foundation and Claus Madsen, Senior Advisor for International Relations for the European Southern Observatory.



Figure 1. Delegates during the post conference tour to Torun, the city where Copernicus was born and the home of the ASTROBASE project.

A presentation of the naming of asteroid (315166) Pawelmaksym was made to the widow of the Polish astronomer, Pawel Maksym, who was a member of the local organising committee and who sadly died early in 2013 at the age of only 29.

Inaugural lecture

The inaugural lecture was presented by Professor Mark McCaughrean, Head of the Research & Scientific Support Department for the European Space Agency in the Directorate of Science and Robotic Exploration. This was a real *tour de force* and set a very high standard for the rest of the meeting. Mark discussed how we have evolved and how we interact with the Universe and our fellow humans. It was a thought-provoking lecture, especially with respect to communication, with comments cautioning about over-spin in written communication and the use of Photoshop in the truly spectacular images we are all now used to seeing. Hopefully this talk can be videoed for web use at some point in the future — it definitely deserves it.

Talks and sessions

Following the inaugural lecture the conference moved to the Copernicus Science Centre, a new building, completed in 2010, on the banks of the Vistula river (<http://www.kopernik.org.pl/en/>).

The call for proposals for talks, which were at the core of the event programming, resulted in the programme being very heavily oversubscribed. Many potential talks were instead presented as posters and, as an experiment, some talks were given a 7-minute slot compared with the normal 15-minute length. This appeared to work well and was a salutary lesson in how to capture the key essence of a talk and present it in a very compressed timeframe. I'm sure this experiment will be repeated as it gives the opportunity for more people to present their work to the full audience.

The sessions were split into the following categories: citizen science and crowd-sourcing; outreach and organisations; the night sky; non-traditional audiences and methods; full-dome presentations; facilities and projects; country specific activities



Figure 2. Delegates discuss during one of the unconference sessions.

and education and children. It is always invidious to pick out individual talks, but there was a huge spectrum of activities and presentation styles. In keeping with the theme of new media, Pamela Gay broadcast the proceedings to the rest of the Universe on Google Hangouts on Air.

One of the highlights of the meeting was a new experiment for CAP, an entire session devoted to planetarium topics, held in the full-dome in the Copernicus Centre. This really brought together the producers of great outreach with the outreach exponents themselves and demonstrated the huge leap in performance (and excitement) that can now be obtained by full-domes.

Two evening discussion sessions focused on "New Opportunities for the CAP Community Including Involvement in the International Year of Light 2015" and "Science Communication as a Creative Industry". The former resulted in extensive discussions from the floor about the lack of knowledge from the astronomy community in the Year of Light and the conclusion that perhaps the organisation was somewhat behind the curve for such a global event with potential for such wide interest.

One of the evening events was the special showing of the new IMAX film *Hidden Universe* at the IMAX theatre on the outskirts of Warsaw. This Australian-produced

film highlighted the European Southern Observatory's facilities in northern Chile and was very impressive, despite the fact we were only shown the 2D version. There is no doubt that the 3D version should be really spectacular.

The unconference session turned out to be extremely popular with themes selected solely by the conference participants. Kevin Govender, the Director of the IAU Office of Astronomy for Development, organised the session which was broken up into six parallel groups. The topics chosen were:

- What is the future of planetariums?
- How to deal with astrology?
- Astronomy beyond science — astronomy and art;
- How to communicate astronomy to policy makers; The Higgs boson and how to work together (with particle physicists);
- Progress on new ways of communicating astronomy with the public;
- Fast and effective evaluation of projects;
- A South American regional node;
- Google+ is for everyone;
- Backup plans for comet ISON activities;
- Creating a site for testimonials about how people's experiences with astronomy led to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers.

Each group fed back to the whole conference with two-minute presentations



Figure 3. The venue for the talks and sessions as delegates prepare for the start of CAP2013.

and questions from the floor. This was extremely well done and provoked a very enthusiastic response from the audience. We could easily have used more time for this.

Organisation and thanks

The initiator of the CAP2013 Polish proposal was Jan Pomierny of the New Space Foundation. Jan was Chair of the local organising committee and a scientific organising committee member. The local organising committee are to be congratulated for putting on a splendid event with a selection of excellent venues and spectacular opening welcomes, discussion sessions and planetarium and science centre tours. Plus, there was an excellently organised conference dinner, two public lectures and a very special tour following the conference to Torun, the city where Copernicus was born and the home of the ASTROBASE project. The meeting venue

deserves special mention; it worked really well, not only in the conference room itself, but also with the excellent refreshments being provided in an adjacent space.

Conclusion and the future

Warsaw was a very interesting and welcoming city, with great food and an extensive range of drinks. We were fortunate in that the weather and the autumn colours on the trees were truly fantastic. Overall CAP2013 was a hugely successful event and a call has now gone out to the community for organisations/institutions wishing to express an interest in holding the next CAP meeting. Because of the IAU General Assembly being held in the summer of 2015, it was agreed at a CAP organisers' meeting held during the conference that the next CAP will take place in spring 2016. CAP2016 will build on detailed evaluation of this event so has the potential to be even better! Overall, an excellent week of

outreach activity showing the huge degree of enthusiasm that people bring to this widely loved topic.

The programme and all information about CAP2013 can be found at: <http://www.communicatingastronomy.org/cap2013/index.html> which is also a repository for numerous photographs (some very humorous) and well worth visiting.

Biography

Professor Ian Robson was the inaugural President of Commission 55 and has been the lead organiser of all the CAP conferences. Although retired he continues to give talks on astronomy to the public and societies. Previously he was Director of the UK Astronomy Technology Centre at the Royal Observatory Edinburgh and prior to that he was the Director of the James Clerk Maxwell Telescope and the Joint Astronomy Centre in Hawaii.