

Hundred and seventy-second session

172 EX/51
PARIS, 11 August 2005
Original: French

Item 57 of the provisional agenda

PROCLAMATION OF 2009 AS INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF ASTRONOMY

SUMMARY

This item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 172nd session of the Executive Board at the request of Italy.

An explanatory note is attached.

Decision proposed: paragraph 13

EXPLANATORY NOTE

PROCLAMATION OF 2009 AS INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF ASTRONOMY

Introduction

1. The sky, our common and universal heritage, is an integral part of the environment perceived by humanity. Humankind has always observed the sky either to interpret it or to understand the physical laws that govern the universe. This interest in astronomy has had profound implications for science, philosophy, religion, culture and our general conception of the universe.
2. Scientific discoveries by astronomers have not only had an influence on our understanding of the universe but also on technology, mathematics, physics and social development in general.
3. Today astronomy is studied by a small number of researchers. Although there is general interest in astronomy, it is difficult for the general public to gain access to information and knowledge on the subject.
4. The institution of the International Year of Astronomy could provide a solution to the problem by providing a scientific basis for the traditional and cultural perception of the sky. It could also encourage scientific research in the field.
5. The year 2009 marks the 400th anniversary of the first use of the telescope for astronomical observation by the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei in 1609. For the first time in history, people became aware of the fact that the earth was not isolated in space but surrounded by other worlds and other celestial bodies. That observation was a milestone in the development of astronomy and the history of humanity as it led to the expansion of the boundaries of the “known universe”, not only in terms of the physical world but also in terms of humanity’s own vision of the limits to be surpassed.

Background

6. The International Astronomical Union (IAU, founded in 1919, composed of approximately 9,000 professionals from 70 countries), at its General Assembly on 23 July 2003 in Sydney (Australia), unanimously approved a resolution in favour of the proclamation of 2009 as the Year of Astronomy, marking the 400th anniversary of Galileo’s discoveries (1609). Following the vote by the General Assembly, the IAU Executive Committee requested the Government of Italy, Galileo’s native country, to submit a formal request to UNESCO and the United Nations to proclaim 2009 Year of Astronomy. An IAU working group was established to promote these events.
7. UNESCO has already undertaken activities for the safeguarding of cultural heritage related to astronomy under the “Astronomy and World Heritage” project launched by the World Heritage Centre in 2003. A group of international experts met in Venice in March 2004 to draw up a support and implementation strategy for the project. The initiative was backed by UNESCO’s Regional Bureau for Science in Europe (ROSTE), the Royal Astronomical Society (United Kingdom) and the Governments of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.
8. At the meeting in Venice, Ambassador Francesco Caruso, Permanent Delegate of Italy to UNESCO, announced that the Italian Government had decided to request UNESCO to proclaim 2009 as International Year of Astronomy. The request was confirmed by a letter sent to the Director-General of UNESCO.

9. ROSTE has recently provided its support for a series of astronomy-related activities in South-East Europe, such as the establishment of a European subregional committee on astronomy to establish cooperation among observatories in the region. ROSTE has also allocated funds to improve the quality of research and technical instruments. In particular, a CCD camera has been provided to the Rohzen Observatory in Bulgaria to permit optimum use of the Observatory's telescope (the largest in Southern Europe), from which all researchers in the region may benefit.

Conclusion

10. International Years may be proclaimed by the United Nations only during the annual General Assembly meetings in autumn at the request of one (or more) Member States, one year in advance. With regard to the International Year of Astronomy 2009, the proclamation must be approved by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 33rd session and brought to the attention of the United Nations General Assembly in autumn 2006.

11. UNESCO played a fundamental role in the celebration of the International Year of Physics 2005 and in the request concerning the proclamation of the International Year of Planet Earth. International Year of Astronomy 2009 could strengthen the visibility within public opinion of UNESCO's competence in the field of science and the importance of international scientific cooperation to the development of knowledge in the field. Furthermore, in view of the implications of astronomy for culture, cultural diversity and philosophy – areas in which the Organization has a clear mandate as a specialized agency of the United Nations – the International Year of Astronomy constitutes a requisite step.

12. Italy is at the forefront in promoting this event and relies, of course, on the support of other Member States. France and Japan have already expressed support for this initiative.

Proposed draft decision

13. In the light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Recognizing that astronomical observations have profound implications for the development of science, philosophy, religion, culture and the general conception of the universe,
2. Aware that the discoveries of astronomers in the field of science have had an influence not only on our understanding of the universe but also on technology, mathematics, physics and social development in general,
3. Noting that the cultural impact of astronomy has been marginalized and confined to a specialized public,
4. Having examined document 172 EX/51,
5. Taking into account the crucial role UNESCO could play in shaping public opinion and raising its awareness of the importance of astronomy to social development through the establishment of links between scientific research networks and the cultural perception of the universe,

6. Invites the Director-General to support all efforts leading to the United Nations General Assembly proclaiming 2009 as International Year of Astronomy;
7. Recommends to the General Conference at its 33rd session to adopt a resolution concerning this subject.