

The 35th COSPAR Assembly

– A Record-Breaking Success

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Coordinating and promoting space research at worldwide level and regularly providing open forums for all space scientists are the ambitious objectives of the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR). Created in 1958, COSPAR holds its general Scientific Assembly every two years. After Houston in 2002 and prior to Beijing in 2006, Paris was the chosen location for the 2004 session.

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The Opening Ceremony. From left to right: R.-M. Bonnet, Y. D'Escatha, F. D'Aubert, J.-J. Dordain, J. Audouze and M. Abadie

Tackling the Task

When this decision was taken in 2000 to hold the 35th COSPAR Scientific Assembly in Paris, from 18 to 25 July 2004, both the President of CNES and the Director General of ESA agreed to give their full support to its organisation. A Local Organising Committee was subsequently set up, under the chairmanship of Prof. Jean Audouze, and charged with the task of organising this prestigious event in the best possible way, but within a reasonable financial envelope ... a real challenge indeed!

As the Assembly was expected to attract more than 1500 participants, an experienced company, Colloquium, was selected to handle all logistics and organisational matters on behalf of and in close collaboration with the Local Organising Committee. After detailed investigation, the Palais des Congrès was chosen as the only suitable venue in Paris able to cope with the large number of participants and to offer the necessary technical facilities.



ESA Director General Jean-Jacques Dordain's address during the Opening Ceremony

Finding the Support

In order to respect budgetary limits, much hard work was required on the part of ESA and CNES representatives to keep the logistics costs as low as possible and to find external partners. The first obvious potential partner was the French Research Ministry, which indeed gave significant financial support. The Minister, Mr François d'Aubert, also very kindly accepted to chair the Opening Ceremony. The Région Ile de France, which is developing a strong innovation and research policy, also made an important contribution. In addition to several French scientific institutions, such as the National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS), international organisations like EUMETSAT also gave their support.

Despite of the current difficult financial climate, Industry also participated, with the main contribution coming from GIFAS, the French Association of Aeronautical Industries. Arianespace was also present in the exhibition area, which was set up to allow some of our partners to present their activities to the participants. ESA and CNES, for example, had a joint stand highlighting their involvement in COSPAR 2004 and presenting their programmes and activities.

A Welcome for Everyone

Not only the world's top scientists took part, but also many students and members of the general public also participated. Under a grant system set up by COSPAR and ESA, students from many different countries were able to present papers and meet experienced scientists during the various conference sessions and workshops. The public was also welcome to attend the morning and evening lectures and panels, such as those given by the 2002 Physics Nobel Prize winner Prof. Riccardo Giacconi, and the 1995 Chemistry prizewinner Prof. Paul Crutzen.

The media, of course, were also not forgotten. A special room was made available for them, and the press could attend not only the regular sessions, but also a number of events organised particularly for them.



The joint ESA/CNES stand



The Arianespace stand and SERCO's 'Cyber Space'

A PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

The record participation in this 35th Scientific Assembly indicates the continuing importance of a forum in which scientists and engineers working in closely related fields can meet colleagues with whom they might not come in contact at events addressing a more limited range of topics. Indeed, the range of science on offer in Paris was impressive, with 94 scientific 'events' making up the core of the programme. These events were loosely grouped according to the topics covered by COSPAR Scientific Commissions and Panels, but many were organised jointly between these bodies to increase the interdisciplinarity. The Programme Committee chaired by Dr Marie-Lise Chanin has received unanimous praise from the COSPAR Council for the excellent job it did.

The topics covered at this year's Assembly included: the Earth's surface, meteorology and climate, the Earth-Moon system, planets and small bodies of the Solar System, atmospheres of the Earth and planets, including reference atmospheres, space plasmas in the Solar System, including planetary magnetospheres, astrophysics, life and material sciences, fundamental physics, satellite dynamics, scientific ballooning, space debris, space weather, planetary protection, research in developing countries, and capacity building. The climax of the meeting was certainly the presentation of the latest results of the NASA and ESA Mars missions and of Cassini-Huygens, which include many exciting discoveries. Of great interest also, with meeting rooms filled to capacity, were the astronomy sessions in which the results of XMM-Newton, Chandra and Integral were reviewed, as well as the presentation on the Gravity probe-B, the first mission fully dedicated to fundamental physics. The Mars presentations offered a unique opportunity to demonstrate the originality and uniqueness of ESA's Mars Express mission, displaying for the first time, and with unprecedented spatial resolution, a global three-dimensional map of the surface and of the chemical composition of the red planet.

In addition to the core scientific programme, two series of general lectures were organised: one each morning on an interdisciplinary topic, and one each afternoon taking the form of a panel discussion in which high-level participants addressed the conditions and policy affecting the carrying out of space research. In spite of their timing early and late in the day, these special sessions attracted a substantial number of attendees, including both COSPAR scientists and the general public.

An early assessment of the papers presented and the ensuing discussions indicates that participants generally found the level of science high and the Assembly extremely interesting and useful.

The COSPAR Scientific Assembly is also a unique forum in which to discuss matters requiring international cooperation, such as the establishment of international guidelines for planetary protection, reference atmospheres and standards of interest to space agencies - and ESA in particular - and the ISO organisation, space debris, etc.

At the initiative of the European Science Foundation's Space Committee, a meeting was organised to initiate contacts between the US National Academy of Sciences represented by Prof. Len Fisk, Chairman of the Space Studies Board, and his Chinese, Japanese and Russian counterparts, with a view to strengthening and developing international cooperation. The roles of the Inter-Agency Consultative Group (IACG) and of the joint ESA-China Double Star Programme were seen as perfect examples of successful ventures in international cooperation. This meeting was very successful and all parties agreed to re-enforce international cooperation, possibly through a new type of IACG.

From a personal point of view, the Paris meeting was my first Assembly since being elected President of COSPAR in October 2002 in Houston. Being French, I felt a special responsibility for ensuring that the Paris meeting would be a success. I was therefore particularly pleased that the Local Organising Committee, composed of ESA and CNES representatives and chaired by Prof. Jean Audouze, worked in such a highly cooperative and efficient way. The number of sessions and meetings was so large and of such great interest that it was frustrating for me not to be able to attend all of them and I would have loved to have been present at more of the presentations.

I was naturally concerned that the inauguration ceremony should go well, especially with a new Minister in charge in France. I was extremely worried when I saw that the large auditorium in the Palais des Congrès still nearly empty just five minutes before the Minister's official entrance! Actually, Mr François d'Aubert was very understanding and agreed to wait fifteen minutes, using the time for informal discussions with ESA's Director General and the President of CNES, until the auditorium was full. In the end, the ceremony went off perfectly and drew many compliments.

In conclusion, organising COSPAR is to me (nearly) as challenging as directing a space science programme. In both cases, when everything is launched and working well, it is so nice to be able to say: "mission accomplie"!



Roger-Maurice Bonnet
President of COSPAR



One of the ninety-four scientific sessions in progress



All our best wishes for Beijing 2006!

Everything possible had been done to ensure that this, the 35th COSPAR Scientific Assembly, would take place under the best possible conditions. The only unforeseeable - even if pleasant! - surprise was the record attendance of the event: instead of the expected 1500 participants, more than 2800 scientists and engineers in fact registered. Counting accompanying persons, the total number of attendees was more than 3100, which is by far the highest participation in the history of COSPAR.

Conclusion

The success of the 35th Assembly can be attributed to several factors, the first of which was the high number and quality of recent space-science-related events, such as the American and European missions to Mars and Saturn, which provided the opportunity for numerous, highly interesting presentations. Secondly, the unquestionable attraction of Paris in summertime played its part. Finally, the strong cooperation between ESA and CNES in the organisation of the event was also certainly a positive factor.

This 35th COSPAR Scientific Assembly was indeed a unique opportunity for the European scientific community to promote its programmes and successes and for Europe, through ESA, and for France, through CNES, to demonstrate the importance of their role in the world of space science.

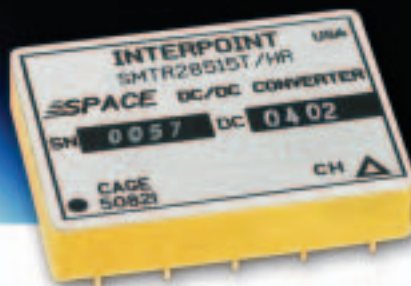
Looking to the future, I wish our Chinese friends, who were present in Paris, every success for the 2006 Scientific Assembly in Beijing!

Acknowledgement

In underlining the crucial role played by the cooperative partnership between all of the entities involved in the organisation of this year's Assembly, I would like to acknowledge also the substantial support received from the ESA Directors involved, namely: Jean-Pol Poncelet, Director of External Relations, David Southwood, Director of Scientific Programmes, José Achache, Director of Earth Observation Programmes and Jörg Feustel-Büechl, Director of Human Spaceflight. r

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