

Earth hour lets city dwellers see stars: Astronomers

March 25 2008

Astronomers from The Australian National University are urging city dwellers to use Earth Hour to look to the stars, as the great ‘switch-off’ will help reduce the light pollution that otherwise obstructs views of space in urban areas.

This Saturday people in cities around Australia and the world will turn off their electric lights between 8pm and 9pm to raise awareness about the links between energy use and global warming. But the darker skies will also be a positive development for people interested in outer space.

“Light pollution is a real problem for optical astronomers, as it overpowers the light from distant stars and galaxies,” explains Professor Brian Schmidt from the Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics at ANU.

“In some cities the light pollution is so bad that people never see even the brightest stars. Even in a relatively small city like Canberra, the telescopes at our Mount Stromlo observatory are no longer used for serious astronomical research in part because of the sheer amount of light leaking from the nearby city.”

Professor Schmidt said that avoiding the light pollution problem was one of the reasons that ANU had decided to build the new SkyMapper telescope at its Siding Spring campus in outback NSW, far enough away from urban areas so that the night sky is clear and vivid.

“When it comes online in a few months, SkyMapper will be among the first of a new breed of surveying telescopes that can scan the night skies more quickly and deeper than ever before,” says Professor Schmidt, one of the lead researchers on the SkyMapper project. “The remote location and lack of light pollution near Coonabarabran will help us collect very rich information.

“This new telescope will provide a deep digital map of the southern sky – the most detailed of its kind ever – which will allow astronomers to study everything from nearby objects such as asteroids in our solar system to the most distant objects in the universe. The data taken by the SkyMapper telescope will be shared with astronomers around the world via the Virtual Observatory initiative.”

But Professor Schmidt says that you don’t need an advanced telescope to enjoy the view of space during Earth Hour. “Even a pair of simple binoculars can be enough to start exploring, and it could foster a love of astronomy for life.”

Source: Australian National University

Citation: Earth hour lets city dwellers see stars: Astronomers (2008, March 25) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-03-earth-hour-city-dwellers-stars.html>

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