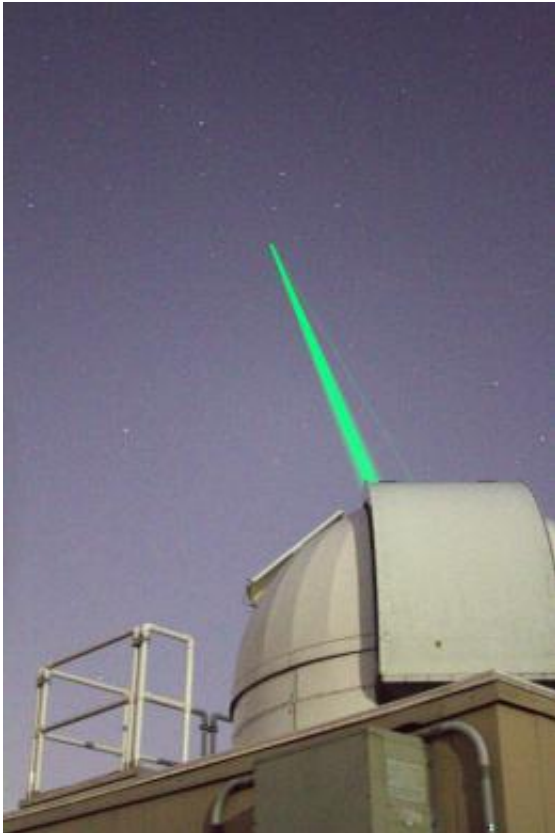


Goddard annual Sun-Earth day has a tweeting twist

March 23 2011, By Karen C. Fox



The Laser Ranging Facility shooting a laser into the sky was one of the favorite moments for many tweeters at Sun Earth Day 2011. Credit: Todd Stowell

Every year, near the equinox, NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md. hosts -- and encourages other museums and educators to host -- a solar extravaganza called Sun-Earth Day. The day is part of a

year-long thematic event celebrating sun science. The theme this year is Ancient Mysteries; Future Discoveries.

March 19, 2011 was the 11th Sun-Earth Day and the events at Goddard had an all-new component: it was a Tweet-up, that is a chance for active Twitter users to come together in person, experience interesting activities, and tweet their comments for all their followers to see. One hundred guests, chosen randomly from some 400 applicants, were invited to participate.

"Normally when we plan a big day like this, we figure only 75 percent of the people who say they're coming really will," says Elaine Lewis, who runs Sun Earth Day out of Goddard. "But this time we didn't lose a single one."

And one can understand why. The day's plan included private tours of the Air and Space Museum and Goddard, a live webcast from NASA Edge, [telescope](#) viewings of the sun and moon, and the chance to meet other tweeters.

The day began bright and early with a bus ride from Goddard to the National Air and Space Museum and an IMAX movie about NASA's STEREO mission called 3D Sun complete with [3D glasses](#). This was the Smithsonian's first ever Tweet-Up, and the museum had numerous ambassadors and scholars help ferry the group around different sites to learn about everything from early researchers of sunspots in the 1600s to Skylab's solar research to looking through a solar telescope. All the while the tweets were flying: "Skylab was constructed using leftover parts from Apollo, including one stage of a Saturn rocket" and "Looking at solar prominences through telescopes!"

Aleya Van Doren organized the Tweet-up portion of the day. She is a member of Goddard's education and public outreach team who worked

closely with NASA Headquarters for this Tweetup. Van Doren is an active personal tweeter herself, and was pleased with how involved the social-media savvy group was. "People put photos up on Flickr within moments," she says, "And one guest had a video camera in his hat so he could live-stream a movie for the web."

Before the day was long underway, the team leaders of Sun Earth Day already knew that the group was reaching a broad audience. "By 10 am we had 3.5 million views and an engaged audience of 788,000 people," says Martha Wawro, another Sun Earth Day organizer who is responsible for education and public outreach for the Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO).

After the Smithsonian, the group traveled back to Goddard by bus for the chance to peek into areas of the campus that the public rarely gets to see. First up was a live webcast produced by NASA Edge, an offbeat NASA production team that reports on NASA science and spacecraft. The NASA Edge team has been involved with Sun Earth Day since before they were even officially called NASA Edge and say they have a great time doing it.

NASA Edge was also doing something new this year, however -- this was their first ever live webcast. In front of an audience that they called the "twiterazzi," they interviewed Goddard experts on such topics as space weather, various Heliophysics missions, and they even had a quiz for Goddard's solar scientist Holly Gilbert in which she was asked to name all the parts of the sun. "Your job's on the line here!" the NASA Edge team joked as they asked Gilbert questions. Luckily, she passed.

The webcast also included pre-recorded footage from Sunspot, New Mexico, home to the National Solar Observatory and a prehistoric solar observatory site in nearby Sierra Blanca.

And then it was on to the Goddard tours. Divided into groups, the tweeters were shown the Mission Operations rooms, the visualization room filled with high resolution televisions -- known as the "hyperwall" -- used to present the most detailed models of climate, earth and sun research, and the Integration and Testing facility where spacecraft go through a battery of pre-flight tests.

The group broke for a dinner reception provided by Honeywell (lunch earlier that day had been provided by ADNET Systems, Inc.) while door prizes were provided by the outreach teams from SDO, Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO), and Think Geek.

The long day ended with a trip to the Laser Ranging Facility to see the laser fired at the moon, which was a favorite for many. Indeed, it was the perfect night for it, since it was the full moon's closest approach since 1993. One tweet read: I turn my head one way and the supermoon is rising. Turn the other way and THERE ARE LASERS IN THE SKY!"

There was another first this year, explains Wawro: an intensive evaluation of the entire Tweet-Up process. All guests were given questionnaires ahead of time to judge their initial knowledge, and there will be follow-up questions to see how much was learned and how well the event went for the guests. This is all done with the intent of improving future Tweet-up events agency-wide.

But, official evaluations aside, Wawro says initial feedback was fantastic: "People were coming up to me to say things like 'It's been a life time's goal to 'feel' NASA in person, and today I did that.' And 'I found my first tweet up experience very informative , inspiring and really, really, well, really, really fun.'" And 'There are no words but I shall try my best to relay my experience to many back home in Uganda."

Yes, Uganda. There were several foreign nationals there who planned to

bring their experiences home, and that, says Sun [Earth](#) Day organizer Lewis is one thing that makes the day special for her. "I wish I could track all the things people do around the world for Sun-Earth day. We have over 200 museums that participate, and people all over the world who organize events. There's a gentleman in Iraq who gets some 3,000 people together in a city square every year to do [sun](#) observations."

By 10 p.m. EDT, the day was finally over. . . but that didn't stop the tweets from rolling in, with comments on the day, calls for photo sharing, and comparisons of favorite events.

As one tweeter summed it up: "Wish I could do it all over again. I miss everything we did."

Provided by JPL/NASA

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