Once in a lifetime experience for theSkyNet citizen scientist

November 5 2012

Last week the top contributor to citizen science initiative theSkyNet travelled to the heart of the West Australian outback to visit the future site of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope.

Mr Kim Hawtin, top contributor to the International Centre for Radio Astronomy Research (ICRAR) project, was awarded this rare opportunity as part of theSkyNet's first anniversary celebrations in September.

ICRAR Outreach and Education Manager Pete Wheeler said that theSkyNet allowed members of the public to donate computing power to process astronomy observations of distant galaxies and enormous simulated data sets.

"The key to theSkyNet is having lots of computers connected, with each contributing only a little, but the sum of those computers achieving a lot," he said.

Mr Wheeler said that Mr Hawtin's contribution has been an important part of theSkyNet's overall processing capacity.

Mr Hawtin spent last Wednesday touring the Murchison Radio-astronomy Observatory on a whirlwind trip 800km North of Perth to Mid West WA. The remote and extremely radio-quiet site will one day host the low frequency portion of the SKA and is already home to two other world-class radio telescopes.

During his tour of the MRO Mr Hawtin was introduced to scientists and engineers working at the site and given a unique tour of the Murchison Widefield Array radio telescope and CSIRO's Australian SKA Pathfinder which was launched early last month.

"It was a great trip," said Mr Hawtin, who is from South Australia. "I didn't get involved in theSkyNet for the rewards, but I have to admit this opportunity was amazing. I even got to climb inside one of the ASKAP telescope dishes and point it towards the sky."

"I've read a lot about the SKA and radio astronomy in the Murchison, but you can't really understand the scale of it until you get there and see the telescopes in action. It's mind-blowing how much they're going to achieve," he said.

In just over a year theSkyNet has attracted 8,000 members from all around the world and completed over 1.6 billion processing jobs, equating to approximately 11 million CPU hours. This is more than a year of dedicated CPU time on an average 1,000 node supercomputer.

"Without enthusiastic members like Mr Hawtin, theSkyNet wouldn't be nearly as successful," said Mr Wheeler.

"In the first year alone contributions from our thousands of members around the world has meant that more than 9 terabytes of information has been processed for our scientists and their research. We're incredibly grateful for this support and see theSkyNet as a collaboration between our members and ICRAR's scientists."

More information: www.theskynet.org/