BOLDLY NAVIGATING WHERE NO ONE HAS GONE BEFORE

the future of the RASC in the 21st century

Wondering if the Society's Carrack will reach the promised shore, let alone keep abreast of the flotilla? Will the press gang recruit a viable crew? Can the map with the 'X' really lead us to treasure for education & public outreach (EPO)? Join us on Sunday at 15:00-16:30 for a panel session and moderated open forum on the future of the RASC —make your voice count!

panellists

Roland Dechesne, President, Calgary Centre
Jim Hesser, Director of the DAO, Single Point of Contact for the Canada Node of Beyond IYA (BIYA), and member of the Victoria Centre
Lauri Roche, 1st Vice President, Victoria Centre
Mary Lou Whitehorne, National President of the RASC, and member of the Halifax Centre

with moderator

Randall Rosenfeld, RASC Archivist, and unattached member

IYA 2009 was an unparalleled success, and while RASC membership did not grow appreciably, it didn't shrink—a remarkable feat given the economic climate. We are still faced with a volunteer deficit, a membership which is too homogenous (50+, white, and male), seemingly too little energy for long-range planning, an impending shortage of skilled hands to comfortably ensure the longevity of our core programmes (such as the Society's oldest and most respected serial publications), and a weak capacity for innovation. Are we making the most of social networking and other rapidly developing modes of electronic communication? Can we successfully remake the RASC to better reflect the demographics of Canadian society without alienating segments of our current membership? The practice of science at all levels is not as well funded in Canada as many think (a condition shared with the arts); are there innovative funding sources and opportunities in the public and private spheres which remain underutilized? Conversely, is lack of funding a sufficient excuse to stop developing and delivering programmes? What can we learn from other Canadian and international examples? Partial solutions may lie in modelling diversity and depth into our programmes.

DIVERSITY—offer a rich and richly sustainable variety of astronomical activities—attract a wide cross section of people

DEPTH—present flexible, multi-staged programmes allowing beginners as well as experts to participate—programmes with depth should enable participants to grow in astronomy over a lifetime

The IAU's conferences on *Communicating Astronomy with the Public* report that providing the general public with genuine opportunities to contribute to the scientific enterprise through ***doing real science*** is a sure way to attract and retain significant numbers of people. Successful projects such as the AAVSO's *Citizen Sky*, NASA's Stardust@home, Galaxy Zoo & Galaxy Zoo 2, and Moon Zoo are examples of effective citizen science which deal with large amounts of data through crowdsourcing. These are pro-am collaborations in the best sense of the term. Integral to the success of these projects is the provision of on-line interactive training and different forms of mentoring, the acquisition and honing of research skills, and the chance to make discoveries and share in their scientific recognition. Many of these projects are ambitious and well-funded; if the RASC cannot develop such projects on its own, it could certainly partner with others in furthering them.

Science as culture has proven remarkably attractive to many people who don't think of themselves as scientifically adept. The exhibition across Canada of graphic art from the Canadian Astronomical Images Gallery was very popular, in airports and in pubs. Many found the production of the Mi'kmaq legend of *Muin and the Seven Bird Hunters* compelling. One of the most impressive of such projects is *Stonehenge* Aotearoa, with significant participation across all age groups. Could something similar work in Canada? The RASC has only begun to explore opportunities for partnerships with arts organizations.

The most exciting EPO ventures worldwide are those which bring astronomy to youth at risk, and under-served or impoverished communities at home and abroad. The IYA Universe Awareness (UNAWE) is one such international project, and Julie Bolduc-Duval, the BIYA Education and Outreach Coordinator, is developing and coordinating a Canadian programme involving professional astronomers. Related projects are those which provide astronomy clubs and basic educational institutions in the developing world with first-world expertise and quality second-hand astronomical equipment in good condition (e.g., project STAR of Astronomers Without Borders). How many of us would be willing to donate equipment for a good cause rather than trade-in to trade-up? The RASC would have much to gain in bringing astronomy to people who are not clones of us. The risks of doing so should not be underestimated, but the advantages for astronomy, for the communities partnering with the astronomers in the education process, and for the astronomers, are hard to overestimate. The RASC could gain a lot of "street cred" and favourable press notice it couldn't otherwise buy, and probably much increased youth participation—but these should never be the motivation for EPO. No project could be successful without partnerships with organizations already working with the target communities. Could the RASC realistically contemplate such commitments?

Partnerships—IYA has shown how important these can be. They are now essential for professional astronomy. What of the amateur scene? A RASC which can function harmoniously as a national organization is stronger than a RASC marred by infighting, and a RASC which can forge mutually beneficial working partnerships with other national and international organizations can reach for the stars.