



# President's Message

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## Dear Colleagues and Fellow Planetarians,

In my previous life in South Africa, when I was a geology professor at the University of Natal in Durban, I organized lots of small specialist paleontology conferences with 100 or fewer participants. I also organized one international biggie with around 400 delegates. At the end of that conference I swore that I would never get involved in such a conference again, as it involved a huge amount of work.

The fact that I can now write that the unique African-Egyptian-Alexandrian conference has been and gone is informative. First, it shows that you should never say never; second, that we humans are really good at forgetting past experiences. From my personal perspective the Alexandria conference has been a momentous happening, with a number of important firsts for the IPS. It was the first IPS conference in Africa, and the first in the Islamic-Arabic speaking world.

You will know from my previous columns that I consider the "International" part of our society title a badge of honor, and one that we need to continuously upgrade and renew.

## It was an awesome site

It was quite awesome to be holding our conference in the international crossroads of the eastern Mediterranean, the city of Alexandria, where Archimedes and Euclid worked in the earliest model of a university, the fabled ancient University of Alexandria. And did you also know about Hypatia, Eratosthenes, Aristarchus and Hipparchus lives and work? Truly an illustrious past.

Our conference hosts at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina not only claim this famous past history, its continuity interrupted by a few centuries or so (a small matter of a fire, they said), but also that this famous Mediterranean city is distinctly different. I guess the best way to describe it is to mention, almost in the same breath, that it is African and Egyptian: to understand this you will have to go there.

And of course, as a sedimentologist, I can only marvel at the gift of the Nile's waters flowing north through one of the driest and hottest places on Earth; a gift from god which has transformed the Nile Valley. I can only imagine what life would be like in Namibia if

the Swakop River flowed all year round.

It was so pleasant to see many of you at the event, and for those that I did not get a chance to talk to, my apologies, but I did talk to a large number of delegates who had never been to an IPS conference before. The opening ceremony was enlivened by Dr Ismail Serageldin's talk, and our other guest speakers, Dr Farouk Elbaz and Dr George Saliba. provided much food for thought with their excellent presentations.

## Warm welcome to new faces

I was impressed at the breadth of our membership, with 44 countries represented and many new people from Africa. I will mention two of them. Both are from Africa and both are plotting to enhance their home cities with a new planetarium. One is Abdulkarim Ajijola from Nigeria and the other was physics professor Dr Manahil M Baher Eldin from Juba University in the Sudan. It was very hard to miss her infectiously happy smile. I wish them both luck in their quest, and they told me that they had learned lots, and met many useful contacts by attending the conference.

It was a striking feature of the conference that our hosts, and especially the IPS blue-shirted helpers with their welcoming smiles, made many of the daily administrative bumps disappear. I do hope that all of you who made the trip to Egypt had a similar experience, and we are still keen to hear from any of you who have things to tell, especially as they will help us to make future conferences even better.

It would be remiss of me not to make special mention of our Egyptian hosts: Omar and Ayman and Nermine deserve special mention, and the others are too numerous to mention, but all worked very hard to make our conference work. I would say that on the hospitality scale they all scored 10 out of 10. Many thanks!

I am sorry that the delegates did not get a chance to meet Planetarium Science Centre Director Hoda Elmikaty, who was unable to be with us

as she had some urgent business in the USA. I know that she was keeping a careful remote eye on things via the internet. I will be formally writing to her and all at the Bibliotheca thanking them on your behalf. I am sure that you all know, or will have guessed that, as usual, there was a lot going on behind the scenes: I am pleased to report to you that things went well there too.

My main problem is that I spent so much time talking to people that I missed large chunks of the conference action. What I did see was great; it is always exciting to see the new things, the cutting edge technology, new CGI, new projectors, software and shows, and the new ways of visualizing data.

From conversations which I took part in or heard out of the corner of my ear, there was the usual ferment and buzz, which, in my view, is the prime reason for attending IPS conferences in the first place. From what I was told first- and second-hand by conference delegates and our professional sponsors and vendors, the conference was a worthwhile event.

The final dinner in the splendid outdoor venue at the Montazah Palace was a fitting punctuation mark to end the proceedings. The palace grounds where our tables were set up for dinner came complete with a huge collection of opportunistic hungry cats, all of them determined to share in the feast. I just checked the collective nouns for cats: the most appropriate ones for the Montazah cats are "clutter" and "nuisance": they were both.

After the dinner was over, we had a ceremony to honor IPS members Susan Button, Terence Murtagh and Thomas Kraupe with IPS Service Awards for their achievements. I suspect that, in common with many of you, their story still has some way to run, for it is apparent to me that this profession of ours is nothing less than an addiction. A beautiful obsession with the stars. They appear, from our organic perspective, to be immutable, but as we learn more and see further, we now know that they are as fickle and as changeable as us: they just operate on a very much longer lifespan. Here's hoping that you all have lots of clear nights to keep a careful curious eye on them. ☆

