

The Care and Feeding of The Local Group (in the twenty-first century)

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The times, they are a changing...

It's time to look at the future of your hometown, homegrown amateur astronomy club. Time to ask the thoughtful, hard to answer questions. Time to get a handle on what you think your astronomy club should provide. And finally, depending on your motivation, the time to act, or maybe just to enjoy the ride.

What brings us all together? For me, it's almost primal—the cool dark velvet of night wraps itself around me, while glittering stars and faint fuzzies beckon. Maybe I'll share a personal insight with a good friend I possibly wouldn't have met if not for the astronomy club. Of course there's science, from the weather on Mars to cosmology to the latest telescope technology, but that's all icing. The cake is much more than science and toys. The cake is why you got interested in the first place. You just have to remember to keep some cake on your plate, because too much icing can make you push the plate away. To paraphrase a good friend of mine, you have to COMMIT ASTRONOMY! Committing astronomy is a personal endeavor first, which often lends itself to the shared journey—that ultimately brings us together under the stars.

What fits? I'm all for keeping our club the right size. Too big and the whole thing is way too impersonal and can be top heavy with bureaucracy. Too small and the whole load is forced upon the few who are committed to keeping the group active. You need a population that can continuously evolve to meet the group's changing needs without endangering the purpose of the group in the process.

What works?, is dependent on personality types and work ethics. Whether the membership is laid back, energetic, or a haphazard mix, the workload associated with the care and feeding of the club should be interesting and fun. Many members find the teaching element of amateur astronomy particularly rewarding. As a group or on your own, local schools, community colleges, state parks or off-the-cuff neighborhood sidewalk observing can provide astronomically stimulating environments. Sharing your knowledge (whether from years of experience or from reading this month's astronomy magazine) and a peek at the Moon or Saturn is always well received. Recruiting can be actively pursued, or simply allowed to happen on a more spontaneous level. The atmospheric environment provides additional flavor to the soup. Foul weather, light pollution, and blood-sucking mosquitoes can put a damper on outdoor dark sky observing. In the wilderness we're confronted with wild and woolly night critters—including the four-wheelin', rifle totin', drunken redneck. Observing from a secure, locked site solves some problems but can accidentally lock out the keyless membership at times. On-site electric, rest rooms, and cell phones are desirable amenities when you can find them. But if you want to observe faint fuzzies, you gotta go where the sky is dark, and you have to be tough. Waiting out the early evening rain can sometimes yield hours of after midnight observing. At remote sites, the best observing happens after most people have gone home. Set your alarm for three in the morning and get ready for a whole new experience. Personally, I can take a little rain if you can

just find a way to keep the mosquitoes to a minimum! A place to meet can also be a place to eat. My motto at most Group gatherings is, "Astronomy, gastronomy, whatever..." Road trips like shuttle launches or joint ventures with neighboring clubs are another source of high-octane fun. What is a typical astronomy club member anyway? Percentage wise, they comprise less than 1/3 of the amateur astronomy community at large—the learned the hard way, hard-core amateur, the telescope nut, the born again astrophysicist, the entertainer (and his accompanying entourage of groupies), the armchair general, and the I'm just happy to be here amateur (peaceful coexists and peepers—clubs need as many of these as they can get, they have a tendency to go hard-core). Then there's the loner, the interested bystander, the uncommitted telescope buyer, and the un-amateur (professional doctoral types, some retailers). Who's left over accounts for the majority of astronomy club turn-over. People who never really give themselves a chance. Some expect to start at the top, others try to purchase the vision of experience. It just doesn't work that way. The median age of the amateur astronomer indicates we're graying as a group, the high cost of entry level astronomy and the need for a secure environment for kids are contributing factors. Do we just acknowledge this or do something about it?

Technology offers us a two-sided sword. You can read this article on the internet, so why bother with a newsletter? CCD imaging seems almost foolproof when compared to classic film astrophotography. Digital setting circles and GoTo drives promise to magically eliminate the celestial navigation learning curve. But what happens to the sense of adventure, the pride of discovery, the development of skills and character that result from patient determination, hard knocks, and rich experience? Are we destined to become the technologically elite, isolated by our own arrogance? Or will there only be back-yard astronomers, extended-weekend warriors, traveling starparty crashers and event chasers?

Can astronomy clubs survive? Should they? We drive miles and miles each year to sites that are succumbing to urban sprawl and light trespass. The legacy we leave the next generation of amateur astronomers is under siege. If we can just make sure our kids can look up and see the stars, maybe astronomy clubs will take care of themselves. The future is still up to us.

When was the last time you saw the Milky Way blazing high overhead?

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