

# SAASTEC Annual Conference

## Conference 2002 - Report

The 2002 SAASTEC conference was held at the new MTN Sciencentre, located in the Century City shopping mall and entertainment complex in the suburbs of Cape Town, from Sunday 8 December to Wednesday 11 December. What follows is an informal report intended to give a feeling for proceedings without attempting to achieve completeness.

Photo's follow the text...

The conference opened on the Sunday afternoon with a tour of the MTN Sciencentre and a performance of the play "i Klips", devised by Director David Muller and actors Mark Hoeben and Brenda Bongiwe Ngxoli. The talented performers demonstrated effectively the use of the Arts to convey scientific themes, in this case the total eclipse of the Sun that occurred on 4 December, and was acclaimed by the audience.

Monday morning was highlighted by keynote speeches. Kelebogile Dilotsotlhe of the Department of Science and Technology spoke on the need for reaching new audiences in science centres and for social inclusion. Ben Johnson and Frank Burnet from the UK showed the importance of going to the people - especially in pubs - and using buses for communicating. Professor Michael Kahn of the Human Sciences Resource Council highlighted the dire state of science and technology education in the country. His comment on a "spike" in the science statistics for Limpopo Province appeared to be explained by the later talk by Shadrack Mkansi of Giyani Science Centre on their extensive work with matric science students in the province. The morning session closed with a fascinating talk by Sian Ede of the Gulbenkian Foundation in the UK on the interpretation of scientific themes by artists.

The afternoon was occupied with parallel sessions. A number of us became the victims of Unizul Science Centre's Derek Fish, having to perform improvised demonstrations in front of 200 participants in the Programme for Young Women that was running simultaneously in the centre. This certainly helped us to hone our skills, and highlighted the need for practice before going live!

The evening included a visit to iThemba Labs near Faure with a tour and braai (or barbeque for non-South Africans), hosted by Ginny Stone.

Tuesday morning started with a plenary session, kicked off by an all too short overview of the latest from the European science centres of ECSITE, by Executive Director Walter Staveloz. Marie Radbo of Sweden's Chalmers University took us to a higher plane (astronomy), but also showed us that airflow cannot be neglected when setting up demonstrations. Ginny Stone's electrified hair stood on end, to the delight of the audience. Julie Cleverdon of

the MTN Sciencentre took us through the marketing of science centres. SAASTEC President and Julie's boss Mike Bruton challenged our ways of running science centres via foxes and hedgehogs.

The tea break was followed by a series of talks relating to the delivery and impact of interactive teaching, by local speakers Simon Mateane (Tsebo-Koloing), Alfred Tsipa (Unizul Science Centre) on the contrast between urban and rural visitors, Shadrack Mahapa (Uninorth) taking science to shopping centres, Mike Gaylard (HartRAO) on the solar eclipse, and David Muller again on the arts-science connection.

The graveyard session after lunch produced some fascinating talks showing new science centres in the making in Newtown, Johannesburg by Richard Waller (Gauteng Education), Martie Hoffman (minus visuals!) on the resurrected Boyden Observatory and Physics Emasondosondo - on the move - by Cynthia Malinga (also Gauteng Education).

Parallel workshops ended the afternoon but not the day, as the diehards repaired to Oudekraal - a beautiful boulder enclosed bay on the Atlantic shores - where they were treated to a wonderful performance of 'Whale Nation' by David Muller, and in the spirit of interactivity then participated in a very therapeutic drumming session before being allowed near food.

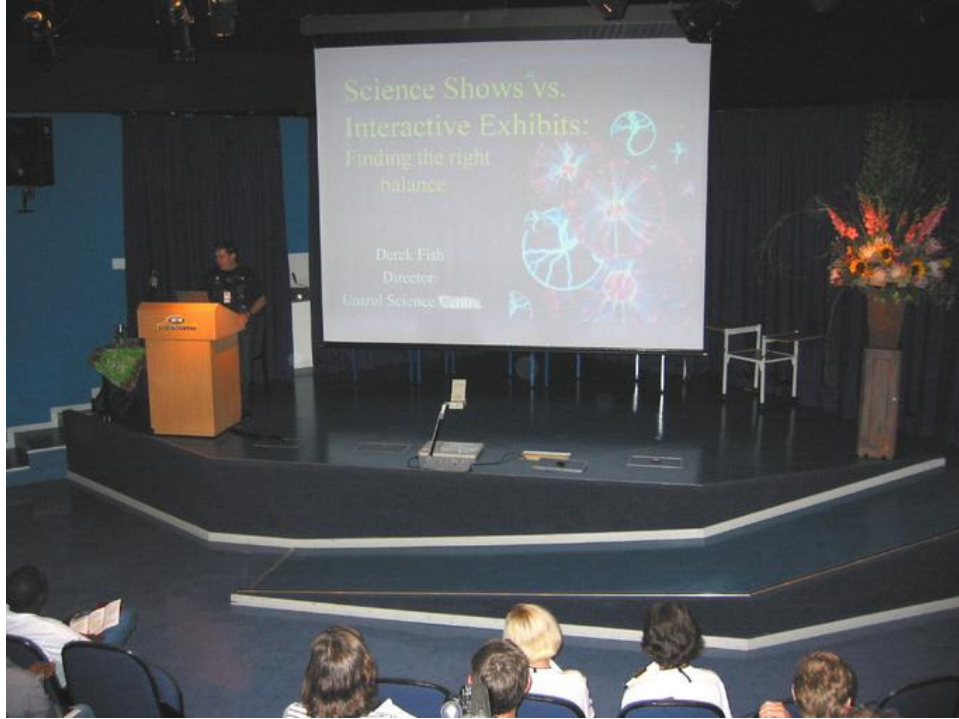
Bleary-eyed participants trickled into the Annual General Meeting the next morning. The authors of the constitution are to be congratulated on their prescience in keeping the meeting quorate ("Those members present shall constitute a quorum"), permitting business to proceed, including the election of new council members. These were Richard Waller and Immo Geingos, the latter as a representative of Namibia.

The morning talks then kicked off with reports from Mike Bruton and Derek Fish on overseas science centre congresses. The practicalities of running science centres and creating and maintaining exhibits were the main themes of the talks that followed, from Jon Weinberg (MTN Sciencentre), Thamsanqa Mphokela (TRAC) on building (and destroying!) bridges, Ian MacKay (Wits Geosciences) on getting kids into a University, Hans Steyn (West Coast Fossil Park) on hands-on fossil-hunting, Alister Hallaway (from New Zealand's Science Alive and all in black) and Dirk Durnez (MTE Studios).

Lunch was followed by a discussion by the panel and members of the audience. One theme that emerged was making science centres attractive to disadvantaged groups, where Elizabeth Rasekoala of the UK highlighted the Black experience. This was compared and contrasted to local experience by a number of speakers. The relationship of science and the arts was a second major theme, and the advantages and disadvantages of their combination provoked interesting debate. The arts were generally seen as providing an ethical framework for science, in addition to providing alternative ways to the conventional presentation of science.

The conference closed with Richard Waller's impressions as a newcomer, followed by Mike Bruton's wrapup.

The MTN Sciencentre staff are to be congratulated on putting together an enjoyably stimulating and varied experience for the conferees.



Derek Fish has the floor



One of Derek's "volunteers" in the demonstration competition leaves the stage



David Muller brings whales to life at Oudekraal.



Drumming at Oudekraal was extremely popular.



Unveiling of the new sundial at Century City during the conference. From the left, Mike Bruton who commissioned it, Dirk Durnez of MTE Studios who built it, Case Rijdsdijk of SAAO who designed it, and Kelibogile Dilosotlhe of DST who is admiring it.