



The University of Fiji

(An Entity of Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji)

Planetary Viewing at the Saweni Campus

The University of Fiji's South Pacific Association of Space Enthusiasts (SPASE) turned out in full force to watch an unusual planetary event in the night skies over the Saweni Campus of the University.

Using a MARS 66 telescope recently purchased by the University more than 70 stargazing enthusiasts drank hot coffee and ate scones as they watched four planets, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn appear out of the night sky from 2 am on April 16th and, at the same time, viewed an almost full moon rise simultaneously in another part of the sky.

The Acting President of the University of Fiji Student Association, Ms. Maca Ratabua said most of the enthusiasts appearing at campus, despite the early hour as Good Friday ended, were students of science and medicine as well as others who had never experienced viewing planets through a telescope. She said that SPASE had made the students realise that Earth was very much connected to the wider cosmos. "Students came all the way from Suva, Tavua, Ba and Nadi. Some students had to sleep over at friends' flats close by, just so they could be part of this event," Ratabua said. "One of our students said that they were so excited because their inner-child was happy. Growing up they had always dreamed of getting a closer look at our celestial bodies, but they could never afford to own a telescope," she said.

Ratabua said students lined up to look at the moon and the planets and stayed well into the very early morning to get a good look at the four planets. "This 'Big Picture' thinking of the University of Fiji has led students to a greater understanding of how the universe works, including our tiny corner of it. The Students Association hopes to partner with SPASE for future events like this," she said.

The joint organisers and co-chairs of SPASE, Professor Ranasinghe Amaradasa and Dr Ramendra Prasad of the University of Fiji, said the number of students and enthusiasts who turned up to watch the alignment of the planets through the telescope was surprising but welcome. The event was witnessed by staff of the University of Fiji as well as visitors from all over Viti Levu who had travelled especially to the campus for the viewing.

Dr Prasad said they had to be patient as the planets rose a little late but while waiting they viewed the moon through the telescope. "At a little past 3 am, the first planet, Saturn appeared – bright and early. This was soon followed by Mars and then Venus which was the brightest of them all," he said. Jupiter was a bit of a late riser but by 5.30 am, it too was in clear view.

"It was an event not to be missed," Professor Amaradasa said. He started the evening with a brief talk about SPASE and future plans of the Association, for example short story competitions and other events. Professor Amaradasa said the telescope they used was a MARS 66 Telescope which was the basic level but the University was planning to purchase bigger telescopes as funds permitted. This was due to the obvious interest in astronomy from students, staff and members of the public, he said.

SPASE was launched last month by Dr Nalin Samarasingha of the Planetary Science Institute of the United States. Dr Samarasingha has an asteroid named after him.

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Fiji, Professor Shaista Shameem said that SPASE and its upcoming events would allow the University of Fiji to contemplate the wonders of the earthly environment from 'outside the box'. The University's new Strategic Plan 2022-2026 set the direction towards a journey in holistic education for the students of the University. "Gazing at the stars is a time-honoured method of looking beyond the obvious in education and intellectual activity," Professor Shameem said. The University of Fiji intended to explore the stars and the planets while keeping its feet firmly on the ground and taking care of Planet Earth and its beauty, she said. "We can only protect our own planet properly if we know what is out there so that we are able to appreciate what we have in our backyard," she said.



Caption for Picture SPASE 4 (L-R): Prof. Ranasinghe Amaradasa, Dean of School of Business and Economics, Mr. Neil Singh, an active member of SPASE, Professor Shaista Shameem, UniFiji Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Ramendra Prasad, HOD Science, and Ms. Dhrishna Charan, Assistant Lecturer