

Astronomy outreach in Namibia: H.E.S.S. and beyond

Hannah Dalglish,^{a,b,*} Heike Prokoph,^c Sylvia Zhu,^c Michael Backes,^{b,d} Garret Cotter,^a Jacqueline Catalano,^e Edna Ruiz-Velasco^f and Eli Kasai^b on behalf of the H.E.S.S. Collaboration

(a complete list of authors can be found at the end of the proceedings)

^aUniversity of Oxford, Department of Physics, Oxford, UK

^bUniversity of Namibia, Department of Physics, Windhoek, Namibia

^cDeutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron (DESY), Zeuthen, Germany

^dNorth-West University, Centre for Space Research, Potchefstroom, South Africa

^eECAP, Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany

^fInternational Max Planck Research School for Astronomy and Cosmic Physics, University of Heidelberg

E-mail: hannah.dalglish@physics.ox.ac.uk

Astronomy plays a major role in the scientific landscape of Namibia. Because of its excellent sky conditions, Namibia is home to ground-based observatories like the High Energy Spectroscopic System (H.E.S.S.), in operation since 2002. Located near the Gamsberg mountain, H.E.S.S. performs groundbreaking science by detecting very-high-energy gamma rays from astronomical objects. The fascinating stories behind many of them are featured regularly in the “Source of the Month”, a blog-like format intended for the general public with more than 170 features to date. In addition to other online communication via social media, H.E.S.S. outreach activities have been covered locally, e.g. through ‘open days’ and guided tours on the H.E.S.S. site itself. An overview of the H.E.S.S. outreach activities are presented in this contribution, along with discussions relating to the current landscape of astronomy outreach and education in Namibia. There has also been significant activity in the country in recent months, whereby astronomy is being used to further sustainable development via human capacity-building. Finally, as we take into account the future prospects of radio astronomy in the country, momentum for a wider range of astrophysics research is clearly building — this presents a great opportunity for the astronomy community to come together to capitalise on this movement and support astronomy outreach, with the overarching aim to advance sustainable development in Namibia.

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1. Astronomy outreach and capacity-building in Namibia

The need for astronomy-related sciences is gaining increasing attention in Namibia, now recognised as a tool for fostering sustainable socio-economic growth. Most recently, in June 2021, the Ministry of Higher Education, Technology and Innovation launched the Space Science and Technology Policy¹. The desire to boost science, technology, and innovation via increased astronomy-related activity is similarly present on the rest of the continent, as illustrated by the African Union’s African Space Strategy—For Social, Political and Economic Integration [1].

Namibia also has a significant advantage in that the country is well suited for astronomical observations [2], given its very low levels of rainfall and light pollution (Fig. 1; [3]). As a result, Namibia is home to the High Energy Stereoscopic System (H.E.S.S.) telescopes [4], as well as other current and planned observatories like the Africa Millimetre Telescope (AMT) [5]. Additionally, there have been significant efforts dedicated to building human capacity development in the long-term, through embracing Namibia’s unique potential for astronomy-related activities. One of the main efforts has revolved around sustainable astrotourism, whereby indigenous star lore can be preserved, and tour guides can be trained in astronomical knowledge. Such training would thereby empower and equip local guides to give tours of the night sky, and ultimately increase and diversify their personal income as well as supporting rural communities as a whole [6, 7].

Another important program is being led by the AMT, which seeks to enhance astronomy outreach and education in Namibia through the use of a mobile planetarium and other educational tools. In 2019, the AMT joined forces with the Netherlands Research School for Astronomy (NOVA), Radboud University, the University of Namibia (UNAM), and the Rössing Foundation, and spent a week travelling to schools in remote areas in northern and eastern Namibia. The mobile planetarium project now comes under the umbrella of the AMT’s Social Impact Plan and will continue after Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, when the team intends to visit every school in the country over the next few years.

2. Astronomy outreach with H.E.S.S.

Observatories provide a perfect setting for informal education [8]. As such, several research facilities around the world offer outreach programmes, including the Kitt Peak National Observatory in Arizona, the Southern African Large Telescope in South Africa, and the Thai National Observatory [9–11].

Telescopes like H.E.S.S. also have a clear potential to be used for outreach purposes. Located in the Khomas highlands in Namibia, close to the Gamsberg mountain, the observatory is made up of five telescopes — including the largest and most powerful Cherenkov telescope in the world. The H.E.S.S. telescopes work together to investigate cosmic gamma rays, and are used by an international collaboration of more than 230 scientists from 41 institutes in 15 countries. The instrument’s name pays homage to Victor Franz Hess, who received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1936 for his discovery of cosmic radiation.

¹<https://africanews.space/namibia-launches-national-space-science-and-technology-policy/>

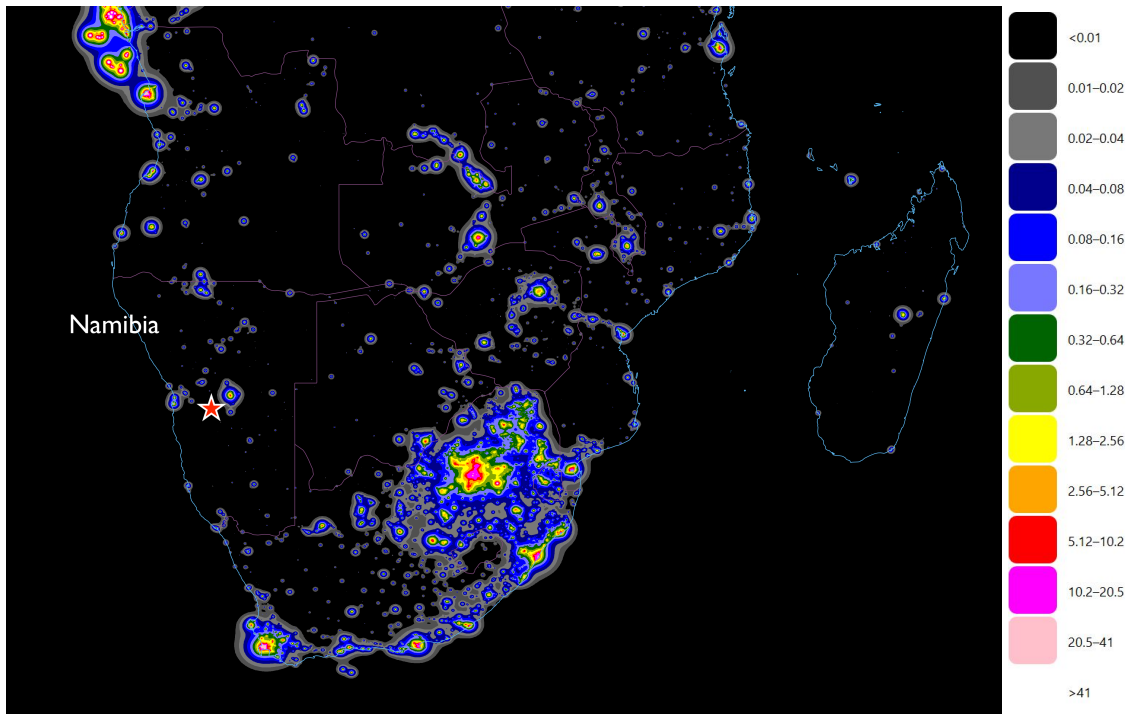


Figure 1: A map showing light pollution across Southern Africa, with Namibia in the West. The colour scale represents the ratio between artificial brightness and natural background sky brightness (assumed to be $174 \mu\text{cd}/\text{m}^2$). The red star highlights the approximate location of the H.E.S.S. telescopes and the Gamsberg mountain. Image courtesy of Fabio Falchi.

2.1 In-person outreach activities

H.E.S.S. has offered a variety of outreach activities over the years. In 2012 an open day was held, and there were plans to host another one in 2020, which was inevitably postponed due to the pandemic. More recently, there have been tours made by VIPs, including UNAM's Vice Chancellor (July 2020), and the UK High Commissioner (May 2021). The H.E.S.S. site also welcomes visits from schools, tourists, and the general public — the number of such visits is limited by a few key factors, described in further detail below.

Overall, the main purpose of H.E.S.S. is to deliver scientific research outputs, and thus, resources for outreach activities have been limited. Despite this, the local staff are always eager to host visitors and give tours during the day to those who are interested. With respect to Namibian schools, the majority are located too far away to be able to make a day trip to the telescopes, nor could they afford the accommodation and travel costs associated with visiting H.E.S.S. Travel remains an equal challenge for most of the schools in the local vicinity (i.e. Windhoek and Rehoboth) which do not have the funds available to hire a bus for the transportation of its pupils. Hence, it is primarily the private schools which have access to the resources needed to visit the observatory, but even then, it has been difficult to garner interest from this demographic, for reasons that are not currently clear.

In terms of the general public and international tourists, the main barrier is that H.E.S.S. is largely unknown to them. Although the observatory is listed in some German and French travel

guides, it has been largely overlooked by the Namibia Tourism Board and other tourism organisations and operators.

2.2 Online communication and outreach

In general, astronomers tend to focus their outreach efforts on traditional activities, like public lectures or radio interviews. However, virtual platforms can be equally effective for reaching members of the public to share new and exciting scientific developments. Although astronomers are highly communicative, only a small proportion are engaged in social media (less than 20%; [12]), of which Facebook and Twitter are the most regularly used. Some astrophysicists are exceptionally popular on Twitter, such as Neil deGrasse Tyson (14.5M followers), Katie Mack (397K), and Sarafina Nance (125K) — showcasing social media’s capacity to inspire and engage the masses in astronomy research, and the scientists behind it.

The use of such online platforms have been taken up by large-scale astronomy-related organisations, including NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), ESA (European Space Agency), ESO (European Southern Observatory), and the SKAO (Square Kilometre Array Observatory). Since as early as 2009, NASA has had a particularly unique engagement with its followers on social media — through the NASA Social program (formerly known as Tweetups) — whereby selected candidates are invited to go behind-the-scenes to meet with NASA personnel, and even to attend Space shuttle launches [13]. Another unique example of online communication comes from ESA, which successfully executed a high-impact online public engagement campaign for the *Rosetta* mission via blogging, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and more — reaching millions of people worldwide [14].

Some astronomy collaborations also maintain an online presence, including H.E.S.S., MAGIC (Major Atmospheric Gamma Imaging Cherenkov), SDSS (Sloan Digital Sky Survey), and the EHT (Event Horizon Telescope). Looking at H.E.S.S. more closely, outreach activities were initiated by the Source of the Month², a blog written by members of the collaboration which features an interesting gamma-ray object each month. The first blog was published in October 2004, and there have been more than 170 features since (there was a hiatus between October 2013–December 2015).

Alongside the H.E.S.S. website, social media accounts are used to share notable science results, such as the recent discovery of the gamma-ray burst (GRB 190829A), the most energetic radiation and longest gamma-ray afterglow observed thus far [15]. These posts are often interacted with the most, especially when they include a video or GIF. Other posts promote the Source of the Month, share the achievements and contributions of collaboration members, celebrate PhD defences, and present the H.E.S.S. prize winners. The YouTube account also features short (~4 minute) interviews with on-site staff. A summary of the H.E.S.S. social media accounts with relevant statistics is shown in Table 1.

3. Future prospects

At the most recent H.E.S.S. collaboration meeting in April 2021, talks and breakout discussions specifically focused on outreach and social impact occurred for the first time. The desire to

²<https://www.mpi-hd.mpg.de/hfm/HESS/pages/home/som/>

Platform	Account created	Total followers	Total posts	Total views
Twitter	November 2010	1222	647	~ 570k [†]
Facebook	March 2016	1705	~ 90	~ 22.6k
YouTube	September 2020	34	3	586
Instagram	November 2020	277	18	532*

Table 1: Overview of the H.E.S.S. social media accounts. Data collected on 29th June 2021.

[†] This value refers to the total number of Twitter impressions since September 2014.

* This value refers to total likes across all posts instead of views.

boost astronomy outreach at H.E.S.S. was strongly apparent, where the discussion revolved around overcoming the obstacles described in Section 2.1. Additional funds would open up several possibilities, such as supporting local schools to visit the observatory, or hiring someone locally who could coordinate visits via tour operating companies. Such a staff member could also support public engagement on the aforementioned online channels. To boost the social impact of H.E.S.S. even further, the collaboration could consider implementing a teacher training program, or even hosting an artist-in-residence.

Ultimately, this discourse comes at a perfect time. H.E.S.S. has a fundamental role to play in the Namibian vision for stimulating the next generation of scientists, while building momentum for human capacity development through astronomy [16]. In Namibia and neighbouring countries, societal impact plans are already underway for two new observatories, namely the AMT and the Square Kilometre Array Observatory [17]. Together, these telescopes will not only advance our understanding of the Universe, but can help to stimulate sustainable development in Southern Africa.

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Full Authors List: H.E.S.S. Collaboration

H. Abdalla¹, F. Aharonian^{2,3,4}, F. Ait Benkhali³, E.O. Angüner⁵, C. Arcaro⁶, C. Armand⁷, T. Armstrong⁸, H. Ashkar⁹, M. Backes^{1,6}, V. Baghmanyan¹⁰, V. Barbosa Martins¹¹, A. Barnacka¹², M. Barnard⁶, R. Batzofin¹³, Y. Becherini¹⁴, D. Berge¹¹, K. Bernlöhr³, B. Bi¹⁵, M. Böttcher⁶, C. Boisson¹⁶, J. Bolmont¹⁷, M. de Bony de Lavergne⁷, M. Breuhaus³, R. Brose², F. Brun⁹, T. Bulik¹⁸, T. Bylund¹⁴, F. Cangemi¹⁷, S. Caroff¹⁷, S. Casanova¹⁰, J. Catalano¹⁹, P. Chambery²⁰, T. Chand⁶, A. Chen¹³, G. Cotter⁸, M. Curyło¹⁸, H. Dalgleish^{1,8}, J. Damascene Mbarubucyeye¹¹, I.D. Davids¹, J. Davies⁸, J. Devin²⁰, A. Djannati-Atai²¹, A. Dmytriiev¹⁶, A. Donath³, V. Doroshenko¹⁵, L. Dreyer⁶, L. Du Plessis⁶, C. Duffy²², K. Egberts²³, S. Einecke²⁴, J.-P. Ernenwein⁵, S. Fegan²⁵, K. Feijen²⁴, A. Fiasson⁷, G. Fichet de Clairfontaine¹⁶, G. Fontaine²⁵, F. Lott¹, M. Füßling¹¹, S. Funk¹⁹, S. Gabici²¹, Y.A. Gallant²⁶, G. Giavitto¹¹, L. Giunti^{21,9}, D. Glawion¹⁹, J.F. Glicenstein⁹, M.-H. Grondin²⁰, S. Hattingh⁶, M. Haupt¹¹, G. Hermann³, J.A. Hinton³, W. Hofmann³, C. Hoischen²³, T. L. Holch¹¹, M. Holler²⁷, D. Horns²⁸, Zhiqiu Huang³, D. Huber²⁷, M. Hörbe⁸, M. Jamroz¹², F. Jankowsky²⁹, V. Joshi¹⁹, I. Jung-Richardt¹⁹, E. Kasai¹, K. Katarzyński³⁰, U. Katz¹⁹, D. Khangulyan³¹, B. Khélifi²¹, S. Klepser¹¹, W. Kluźniak³², Nu. Komin¹³, R. Konno¹¹, K. Kosack⁹, D. Kostunin¹¹, M. Kreter⁶, G. Kukec Mezek¹⁴, A. Kundu⁶, G. Lamanna⁷, S. Le Stum⁵, A. Lemièrre²¹, M. Lemoine-Goumard²⁰, J.-P. Lenain¹⁷, F. Leuschner¹⁵, C. Levy¹⁷, T. Lohse³³, A. Luashvili¹⁶, I. Lypova²⁹, J. Mackey², J. Majumdar¹¹, D. Malyshev¹⁵, D. Malyshev¹⁹, V. Marandon³, P. Marchegiani¹³, A. Marcowith²⁶, A. Mares²⁰, G. Marti-Devesa²⁷, R. Marx²⁹, G. Maurin⁷, P.J. Meintjes³⁴, M. Meyer¹⁹, A. Mitchell³, R. Moderski³², L. Mohrmann¹⁹, A. Montanari⁹, C. Moore²², P. Morris⁸, E. Moulin⁹, J. Muller²⁵, T. Murach¹¹, K. Nakashima¹⁹, M. de Naurois²⁵, A. Nayerhoda¹⁰, H. Ndiayavala⁶, J. Niemiec¹⁰, A. Priyana Noel¹², P. O'Brien²², L. Oberholzer⁶, S. Ohm¹¹, L. Olivera-Nieto³, E. de Ona Wilhelmi¹¹, M. Ostrowski¹², S. Panny²⁷, M. Panter³, R.D. Parsons³³, G. Peron³, S. Pita²¹, V. Poireau⁷, D.A. Prokhorov³⁵, H. Prokoph¹¹, G. Pühlhofer¹⁵, M. Punch^{21,14}, A. Quirrenbach²⁹, P. Reichherzer⁹, A. Reimer²⁷, O. Reimer²⁷, Q. Remy³, M. Renaud²⁶, B. Reville³, F. Rieger³, C. Romoli³, G. Rowell²⁴, B. Rudak³², H. Rueda Ricarte⁹, E. Ruiz-Velasco³, V. Sahakian³⁶, S. Sailer³, H. Salzmann¹⁵, D.A. Sanchez⁷, A. Santangelo¹⁵, M. Sasaki¹⁹, J. Schäfer¹⁹, H.M. Schutte³³, U. Schwanke³³, F. Schüssler⁹, M. Senniappan¹⁴, A.S. Seyffert⁶, J.N.S. Shapopi¹, K. Shiningayamwe¹, R. Simoni³⁵, A. Sinha²⁶, H. Sol¹⁶, H. Spackman⁸, A. Specovius¹⁹, S. Spencer⁸, M. Spir-Jacob²¹, Ł. Stawarz¹², R. Steenkamp¹, C. Stegmann^{23,11}, S. Steinmassl³, C. Steppa²³, L. Sun³⁵, T. Takahashi³⁷, T. Tanaka³⁸, T. Tavernier⁹, A.M. Taylor¹¹, R. Terrier²¹, J. H.E. Thiersen⁶, C. Thorpe-Morgan¹⁵, M. Tluczykont²⁸, L. Tomankova¹⁹, M. Tsirou³, N. Tsujii³⁹, R. Tuffs³, Y. Uchiyama³¹, D.J. van der Walt⁶, C. van Eldik¹⁹, C. van Rensburg¹, B. van Soelen³⁴, G. Vasileiadis²⁶, J. Veh¹⁹, C. Venter⁶, P. Vincent¹⁷, J. Vink³⁵, H.J. Völk³, S.J. Wagner²⁹, J. Watson⁸, F. Werner³, R. White³, A. Wiercholska¹⁰, Yu Wun Wong¹⁹, H. Yassin⁶, A. Yusufzai¹⁹, M. Zacharias¹⁶, R. Zanin³, D. Zargaryan^{2,4}, A.A. Zdziarski³², A. Zech¹⁶, S.J. Zhu¹¹, A. Zmija¹⁹, S. Zouari²¹ and N. Żywucka⁶.

¹University of Namibia, Department of Physics, Private Bag 13301, Windhoek 10005, Namibia

²Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 31 Fitzwilliam Place, Dublin 2, Ireland

³Max-Planck-Institut für Kernphysik, P.O. Box 103980, D 69029 Heidelberg, Germany

⁴High Energy Astrophysics Laboratory, RAU, 123 Hovsep Emin St Yerevan 0051, Armenia

⁵Aix Marseille Université, CNRS/IN2P3, CPPM, Marseille, France

⁶Centre for Space Research, North-West University, Potchefstroom 2520, South Africa

⁷Laboratoire d'Annecy de Physique des Particules, Univ. Grenoble Alpes, Univ. Savoie Mont Blanc, CNRS, LAPP, 74000 Annecy, France

⁸University of Oxford, Department of Physics, Denys Wilkinson Building, Keble Road, Oxford OX1 3RH, UK

⁹IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, F-91191 Gif-sur-Yvette, France

¹⁰Instytut Fizyki Jądrowej PAN, ul. Radzikowskiego 152, 31-342 Kraków, Poland

¹¹DESY, D-15738 Zeuthen, Germany

¹²Obserwatorium Astronomiczne, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, ul. Orla 171, 30-244 Kraków, Poland

¹³School of Physics, University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 2050 South Africa

¹⁴Department of Physics and Electrical Engineering, Linnaeus University, 351 95 Växjö, Sweden

¹⁵Institut für Astronomie und Astrophysik, Universität Tübingen, Sand 1, D 72076 Tübingen, Germany

¹⁶Laboratoire Univers et Théories, Observatoire de Paris, Université PSL, CNRS, Université de Paris, 92190 Meudon, France

¹⁷Sorbonne Université, Université Paris Diderot, Sorbonne Paris Cité, CNRS/IN2P3, Laboratoire de Physique Nucléaire et de Hautes Energies, LPNHE, 4 Place Jussieu, F-75252 Paris, France

¹⁸Astronomical Observatory, The University of Warsaw, Al. Ujazdowskie 4, 00-478 Warsaw, Poland

¹⁹Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Erlangen Centre for Astroparticle Physics, Erwin-Rommel-Str. 1, D 91058 Erlangen, Germany

²⁰Université Bordeaux, CNRS/IN2P3, Centre d'Études Nucléaires de Bordeaux Gradignan, 33175 Gradignan, France

²¹Université de Paris, CNRS, Astroparticule et Cosmologie, F-75013 Paris, France

²²Department of Physics and Astronomy, The University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, United Kingdom

²³Institut für Physik und Astronomie, Universität Potsdam, Karl-Liebknecht-Strasse 24/25, D 14476 Potsdam, Germany

²⁴School of Physical Sciences, University of Adelaide, Adelaide 5005, Australia

²⁵Laboratoire Leprince-Ringuet, École Polytechnique, CNRS, Institut Polytechnique de Paris, F-91128 Palaiseau, France

²⁶Laboratoire Univers et Particules de Montpellier, Université Montpellier, CNRS/IN2P3, CC 72, Place Eugène Bataillon, F-34095 Montpellier Cedex 5, France

²⁷Institut für Astro- und Teilchenphysik, Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck, A-6020 Innsbruck, Austria

²⁸Universität Hamburg, Institut für Experimentalphysik, Luruper Chaussee 149, D 22761 Hamburg, Germany

²⁹Landessternwarte, Universität Heidelberg, Königstuhl, D 69117 Heidelberg, Germany

³⁰Institute of Astronomy, Faculty of Physics, Astronomy and Informatics, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Grudziadzka 5, 87-100 Torun, Poland

³¹Department of Physics, Rikkyo University, 3-34-1 Nishi-Ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo 171-8501, Japan

³²Nicolaus Copernicus Astronomical Center, Polish Academy of Sciences, ul. Bartycka 18, 00-716 Warsaw, Poland

³³Institut für Physik, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Newtonstr. 15, D 12489 Berlin, Germany

³⁴Department of Physics, University of the Free State, PO Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa

³⁵GRAPPA, Anton Pannekoek Institute for Astronomy, University of Amsterdam, Science Park 904, 1098 XH Amsterdam, The Netherlands

³⁶Yerevan Physics Institute, 2 Alikhanian Brothers St., 375036 Yerevan, Armenia

³⁷Kavli Institute for the Physics and Mathematics of the Universe (WPI), The University of Tokyo Institutes for Advanced Study (UTIAS), The University of Tokyo, 5-1-5 Kashiwa-no-Ha, Kashiwa, Chiba, 277-8583, Japan

³⁸Department of Physics, Konan University, 8-9-1 Okamoto, Higashinada, Kobe, Hyogo 658-8501, Japan

³⁹RIKEN, 2-1 Hirosawa, Wako, Saitama 351-0198, Japan