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South Africa's barefoot astronomer

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Try exploring the nature and evolution of the universe, looking 13.7-billion years back in time, unravelling black holes and watching stars being born. Try tracking galaxies, identifying the nature of dark energy, navigating three-dimensional galactic maps and studying cosmic magnets, while decoding extra-terrestrial signals and finding planets capable of supporting life, then challenging the theory of relativity – all barefoot.

Ten days ago in Washington DC, in advance of the annual convention of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, Dr Bernie Fanaroff, director of the South Africa SKA Project, introduced the "Barefoot Astronomer" at a breakfast meeting while addressing the Corporate Council on Africa on the continent's bid to host the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) project.

Simon Ratcliffe, an astronomer and a member of the South African SKA bid team, has been part of the MeerKAT project (a precursor to SKA) for several years. His work includes cutting-edge astronomy, including the recent and successful very long baseline interferometry (VLBI) observations.

"His astronomical colleagues are doubtful if Ratcliffe owns a pair of shoes or even a set of 'plakkies' (flip flops or sandals) – let's just say that no-one has even seen him wearing such items. He has a rather peculiar habit of working barefoot," Fanaroff said in a statement on 18 February.

Taking the SKA to the people

In the next few years, in the build-up to the SKA project, Ratcliffe – South Africa's "Barefoot Astronomer" – will not only conduct his science but, more importantly, will also travel extensively promoting the benefits of the SKA project for humankind and for Africa, in particular.

He will focus not only on the global scientific community and astronomers generally, but interested members of the general public too. He will do this in a light-hearted fashion, making use of simple, everyday terminology and, of course, be barefoot.

"Young people interested in astronomy, and who might work on this project in future, are destined to become experts in future technologies that will be in high demand around the globe," predicts Ratcliffe.

Part of winning the SKA project will be to leave a legacy of excellence in physics and engineering.

"There is still so much more to learn and discover than what we already know, so young people should consider careers in this fascinating field," says Ratcliffe.

"South Africa already has world-class technology with the KAT-7, which is a test bed for the bigger MeerKAT (64 dishes when complete). So, one day when we find extra-terrestrial life, we can literally say, 'Look what the KAT dragged in!'"

SAinfo reporter

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Simon Ratcliffe (centre) and Jasper Horrell at the South African SKA team's MeerKAT office in Cape Town (Photo: SKA South Africa)



Three of the seven antennas of the KAT-7 demonstrator radio telescope outside Carnarvon in the Northern Cape province. The KAT-7 is paving the way for the 80-dish Karoo Array Telescope (also known as the MeerKAT), due to be commissioned in 2014/15 as a precursor to the SKA – and as one of the most powerful telescopes in the world in its own right (Photo: SKA South Africa)

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