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O09 - Bringing Astronomy to the Public: The Development of "Starry Night over Bangkok" and "Starry Night in the Park" as Innovative Public Astronomy Engagement Programs

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The National Astronomical Research Institute of Thailand (Public Organization) (NARIT) has developed astronomy festivals under "Starry Night" series, with the aim of bringing astronomy beyond observatories into public spaces, promoting science awareness, while supporting dark sky awareness and astrotourism.

These programs were designed as interactive Astronomy Festivals, anticipating wide range of audience and interests featuring telescope observations, naked-eye constellation tours, astronomy exhibits, hands-on workshops, science communication activities, children's learning zones, and public talks by professional astronomers. The activity design emphasizes experiential learning, allowing participants of all ages to directly engage with astronomical phenomena in an informal learning environment.

The implementation has demonstrated remarkable public participation. The inaugural "Starry Night over Bangkok" attracted more than 12,000 participants, while the second event welcomed over 36,000 visitors, making it one of the largest stargazing event known worldwide. The activities successfully reached diverse audiences, including families, students, educators, amateur astronomers, tourists, and the general public. Many additional spinoff series emerged over other location under the name "Starry Night over…" has replicated similar success in different cities at their respective scales.

Beyond increasing public engagement in astronomy, the programs have generated broader societal benefits by enhancing scientific awareness, encouraging STEM learning among young people, strengthening family-based learning experiences, promoting the conservation of dark skies, and stimulating nighttime tourism and local economic activities. Furthermore, the initiatives have fostered collaborations among scientific institutions, local governments, educational organizations, private sectors, and community networks.

The success of these programs demonstrates that public astronomy activities conducted in accessible urban and community spaces represent an effective model for science communication and public engagement. The approach offers a scalable framework that can be adapted by other regions to promote informal science education, sustainable astronomical tourism (Astrotourism), and lifelong learning through meaningful public participation.

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