

Planetary Wonderings

June Focus: Night Sky Network and PlanetQuest

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What is the Night Sky Network? Is it a new premium cable channel? Is PlanetQuest the newest *Star Trek* series? How do I find out more about these? If you are asking these questions, then you have “tuned in” to the right place!

PlanetQuest (<http://planetquest.jpl.nasa.gov/>) is a part of JPL's Navigator Program, which encompasses several of NASA's extra-solar planet-finding missions. Scientists will analyze the atmospheres of distant worlds, looking for carbon dioxide, water, and ozone. The substantial presence of all three gasses may suggest that life is present.

The Night Sky Network (<http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/index.cfm>), founded by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Planetquest program, is a nationwide coalition of astronomy clubs bringing the science, technology and inspiration of NASA's missions to the general public. Members of the NSN share their time and telescopes to provide communities with unique astronomy experiences at science museums, observatories, classrooms, and under the real night sky.

Ohio has a dozen astronomy clubs that are members of the NSN. The nearest is the Columbus Astronomical Society (<http://www.the-cas.org/>). Founded in 1947 the Columbus Astronomical Society (CAS) is central Ohio's largest and oldest organization dedicated to the amateur study of astronomy. Probably the club's most visible activity is the public education program offered most weekends at the Perkins Observatory (<http://www.perkins-observatory.org/>) near Delaware. CAS members receive a monthly newsletter, *Prime Focus*. They can also take advantage of discounts on subscriptions to *Astronomy* and *Sky and Telescope* magazines, and use of two private dark-sky sites for observing as well as the use of some sophisticated telescopes.

The Night Sky Network website has a link to educational activities for students of all ages. One of them is the PlanetQuest Student Activity Guide on the PlanetQuest website (http://planetquest.jpl.nasa.gov/resources/resources_index.cfm). Activities include measuring a tree, the earth, and the galaxy as well as how to find planets one cannot see. In practical ways the activities help students easily grasp complicated astronomy problems and can be done on either a middle or high school level. The exercises use everyday items such as drinking straws, clay, meter sticks, rice, and string.

Since it was mentioned above, this month's recommended resource is *Astronomy* magazine found on the WWW, appropriately enough, at www.astronomy.com. Personally, I think the magazine is better than the website. Then again, I am partial to “paper.” When I started my own astronomy club in high school I got a subscription at the club discount price. I remember the magazine being chocked full of the latest, coolest, astronomy photographs.

As always, remember to **keep looking up!**