



PRESS RELEASE: World's Largest Virtual Solar System Drive 20.12.07

More than 50 people have celebrated the official unveiling of a half-million dollar project focussed on boosting tourism in Warrumbungle Shire and regional NSW.

The World's Largest Virtual Solar System Drive was launched on Wednesday December 19th at Australia's largest research centre for optical astronomy, Siding Spring Observatory near Coonabarabran.

The event was hosted by Warrumbungle Shire Council together with AusIndustry, the Federal Government body that funded the \$418,365 project.

Warrumbungle Shire Mayor Cr. Peter Shinton welcomed guests, describing how an idea generated 10 years ago had finally become a reality, making astronomy "the focus of a tourist market".

Local astronomer John Shobbrook spoke of his involvement in the project during the past decade.

"Ten years ago when I first proposed the construction of this model, in addition to it being a tourist attraction, I hoped that it would also serve as an educational resource," Mr Shobbrook said.

"Being 'immersed' in the Solar System in this way will truly give students and tourists a feel for the vastness of space and the fragility of the tiny planets – especially planet Earth."

AusIndustry Regional Manager Tim Cotter officially launched the new tourist attraction, which he said offered not only tourism and education value but reinforced the road safety message.

Mr Cotter, who recently moved to Tamworth from Newcastle, described his first journey along the Solar System Drive to Coonabarabran yesterday as a "fantastic experience", and recognised the hard work, persistence and drive injected into the project by all those involved.

Guests included Warrumbungle Shire Council Mayor Cr. Peter Shinton and General Manager Mr Bob Geraghty, Federal Member for Parkes Mr Mark Coulton, ANU Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics Director Professor Harvey Butcher, Gamilaraay Elder Mr Bill Robinson, the Solar System Drive Project Management Committee including Project Manager Rebecca Ryan as well as representatives from

local Councils, those involved the tourism industry and community members supportive of the project.

Newton's Mechanical Repairs, Coolah Fibreglass and Steve Walker Signwriting were thanked for their efforts in construction, artwork and installation of the 24 planet billboards.

The launch also included the release of an activity book targeted at primary school students to complete either in the car as they experience the drive or in the classroom with their teacher.

Visitors can experience an astronomic adventure when they travel Pluto to the Sun along one or more of five drives that lead to Coonabarabran from Gulgong, Dubbo, Tamworth, Merriwa and Moree. The Solar System Drive is scaled so the 3-dimensional fibreglass planets and distance between each is 38 million times smaller than it would be in outer space.

All drives finish at Siding Spring Observatory 28 kilometres west of Coonabarabran. The Sun in this scaled model is represented by the huge Anglo-Australian Telescope dome at the Observatory.

Warrumbungle Shire Council's Tourism Unit will continue to promote the new tourist attraction and maintain the planet billboards to ensure a high quality experience for visitors.

Brochures and maps of the drive are available or visitors interested in the attraction can go to the website www.solarsystemdrive.com.

For more information on the World's Largest Virtual Solar System Drive or to obtain a brochure, map or activity book contact Coonabarabran Visitor Information Centre on freecall 1800 242 881.

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