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THE "DE LA PLAGE AUX ÉTOILES" FESTIVAL OF COLLIOURE

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Abstract. From 2011 to 2014, and since 2018, the *De La Plage aux Étoiles* festival of Collioure has invited tourists and inhabitants in Pyrénées-Orientales to discover recent results in astronomy and astrophysics, with exhibitions, conferences and stargazing sessions. After having organised it 5 times and with a sixth festival in preparation in 2019, and as we got a grant from the SF2A in 2018, we wish to present this festival, its evolution, and the feedback from the audience.

Keywords: Outreach

1 Introduction

Fig. 1. A view of Collioure (credit: E. Lagadec).

Collioure (Fig. 1) is a village in the South of France (Pyrénées-Orientales department), 25 km north of Spain. As it is quite far from large cites with astrophysics laboratories (e.g Montpellier is at 140 km), or observatories (the *Pic du Midi* observatory is at 245 km), there were few outreach events or opportunities for the general public to meet researchers. However, we realised that many people have questions about the night sky or celestial bodies, and that they cannot always discriminate genuine information from fake science. Consequently, in 2011, we decided to create *De La Plage aux Étoiles* (From the beach to the stars), an outreach festival about astronomy and astrophysics in Collioure, in order to meet this demand. This is also a great opportunity to show the evolution of our knowledge by talking about the latest scientific results in our field, such as Pluto's

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new moons in 2012 or the first black hole image in 2019. Besides, we can explain the activities of French astrophysics laboratories, as the general public often believes that all the research in astrophysics is done at NASA. Here, we present the organisation of this event and what it taught us about the expectations of the general public.

2 Organisation

The *De La Plage aux Étoiles* festival is located at the Cultural Centre of Collioure. It lasts a week and is composed of three types of events:

- An exhibition displayed during the day all the week, for which we offer guided tours to answer questions of the visitors. We also display videos about astronomy and space.
- Conferences on Monday (for the opening of the festival), Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from 6 pm to 7 pm.
- Stargazing with telescopes on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from 9 pm to 12 am. We work with local amateur astronomers and we ask the Collioure city council to switch off 5 street lamps around the Cultural Centre, which makes the Milky Way visible.

The festival is entirely free and open to all ages, astronomy enthusiasts or novices.

For the four first festivals (2011-2014), *De La Plage aux Étoiles* was organised without any formal structure and the invoices were paid by the Collioure city council. In 2017, we created an association *loi 1901* (with 7 volunteers to this day) in order to get our own budget. It allowed us to get grants from various organisations (Collioure city council, Pyrénées-Orientales department council, SF2A) and to get more flexibility on our expenses. We were thus able to pay for the travels, meals and accommodation of 3 speakers in 2018, and 2 in 2019, whereas we could only have a single guest per year at the previous festivals. This budget also covers the printing of flyers, posters and a banner. The total cost of a festival is $\sim$ 3000 euro.

Fig. 2. Examples of posters for the *De La Plage aux Étoiles* festival in 2012 (left) and 2018 (right).

We also have sponsors who provide non-financial help such as Paris Observatory and Côte d'Azur Observatory who lend us their exhibitions for free, the local radio France Bleu Roussillon, and the association of retail traders and artisans of Collioure.

The *De La Plage aux Étoiles* festival is advertised by distributing posters (see Fig. 2) and flyers in the village (official displays, visitor center, hotels, shops...), in the official flyer containing the list of all the numerous summer activities in Collioure, on local tourism websites, in astronomy websites and magazines (AFA/Ciel & Espace, SAF/L'Astronomie), and in local media such as the *L'Indépendant* newspaper or the *France Bleu Roussillon* radio. The festival has also its own website`https://www.astrocollioure.fr`.

3 Audience and visitors feedback

We have monitored the number of visitors at the festival year after year (see Fig. 3). In 2018, we welcomed 1009 visitors. The attendance levels at the exhibition are very variable. Conferences are quite successful, as they attract 60 to 100 people each, except the first year of the festival (2011) where the event was less advertised compared to the following years. However, our worst audience at a conference was reached in 2014 on the Saturday, when we proposed a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) conference where the audience could ask any astronomy related question to three researchers. Apparently, the audience in Collioure is not ready for this kind of open format (although the people who attended had a really good time as we had a loud timer to limit the length of the answers from the researchers). The stargazing sessions are the most popular element of *De La Plage aux Étoiles*, with a record number of 280 visitors on the last evening in 2018.

These results could be explained by the fact that while the general public is curious about astronomy, there is still a lot of self-censorship. Many people seem to think that even if it is an outreach event, they need to have some prior knowledge to be able to understand its content. Stargazing sessions are perceived as more accessible to the general public, and visitors often like to discuss with the researchers at that time, in a more informal and confidential setting. Our visitors seem to really enjoy the various opportunities to discuss with researchers, and are pleasantly surprised to meet scientists who do not match with the stereotypes (e.g young people, women, French researchers...). After their visit, especially after the stargazing sessions, people realise that our content is totally accessible and many come back to the festival the following days. We also have people who came to our festival on several years.

We noticed that the organisation of *De La Plage aux Étoiles* benefits from its local roots. Indeed, one of the founder of this event and several volunteers of the association come from Collioure, which makes the organisation easier. It is also a valuable asset when we advertise this event.

4 Conclusion

The *De La Plage aux Étoiles* festival in Collioure has been organised 5 times and a 6th edition is currently prepared. With a small budget and a reduced team, we managed to organise a festival with up to 1009 visitors over a week.

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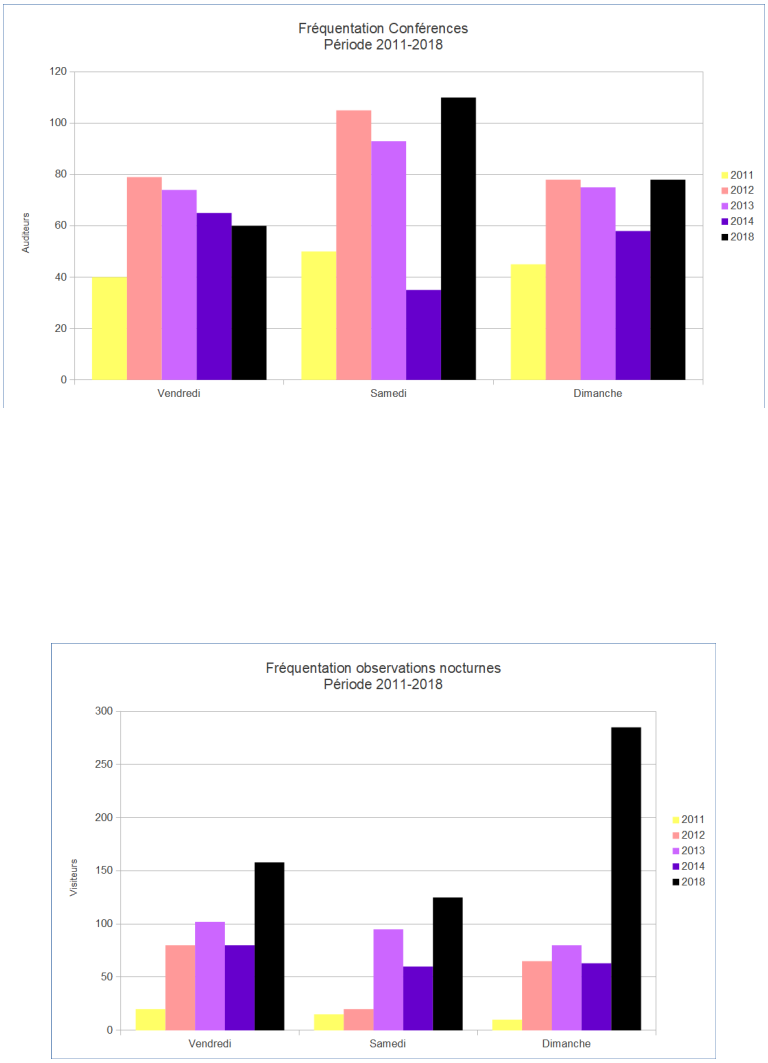

Fig. 3. Attendance levels at the *De La Plage aux Étoiles* festival for the exhibitions (top) and the stargazing sessions (bottom).