

## **My Life with COSPAR: Looking Back, Looking Forward**

I still remember my research Director Dr André Spizzichino telling me in the fall of 1972 after I received my PhD, “*Well, you should present your results at COSPAR.*” “*What is COSPAR?*” How could I imagine when I asked this silly question (I was 25 years old and had never attended a scientific congress) that I would spend so much of my life immersed in COSPAR! Since my first talk at COSPAR in Konstanz, Germany, in 1973 I have taken part in many Scientific Assemblies, organized several events, and was elected Vice-Chair, then Chair of Scientific Commission A, which meant 16 years as a COSPAR Officer. Over the years, I became familiar with COSPAR practices, and enjoyed friendly relations with the Secretariat Director Dzidek Niemirowicz, with Aaron Janofsky, then with Stan Grzedzielski. In 2001 Stan and Gerhard Haerendel, then President of COSPAR, asked me about my interest in becoming the Director of COSPAR. I thought that my time had not yet come. Isaac Revah was appointed and worked as Director until he retired at the end of 2007. A vacancy notice was circulated in 2006, and the then President Roger-Maurice Bonnet called me in early 2007 with the wonderful news that my application had been selected, with a start date of January 2, 2008.

On December 31, 2019, my term as COSPAR Director will come to its end, and I am pleased that Dr Jean-Claude Worms has been selected to become the new Director. I shall leave in full confidence that the COSPAR Secretariat will be in the best possible hands. It is time now to look back at the twelve years spent in this office and also to look forward to what I expect will be a bright future for COSPAR.

### **First steps, very encouraging**

Twelve years, that’s quite some time! My first COSPAR Scientific Assembly as a Director was in 2008 in Montreal, an easy one since most of the work had been done under the responsibility of my predecessor, who did a great job with our Canadian hosts. In 2010 in Bremen, COSPAR achieved its highest attendance, over 3,000 participants, slightly more than Paris in 2004 – but tourism which may have helped attract participants to the French capital was not the cause of this record: the wonderful organization of our German hosts, particularly the team assembled by the ZARM institute, will remain a role model for any COSPAR Assembly host.

### **Birth of the COSPAR Symposium**

In 2010 the Council was to select the Assembly site for 2014. I had attended in 1974 the COSPAR Assembly in Brazil, and since then no Assembly had been hosted in South America. Therefore, I approached our Brazilian colleagues who were willing to prepare a bid, forty years after São Paulo, but their proposal failed to receive governmental financial support, and the Russian offer was finally selected. It was in Bremen that I made a suggestion to Roger Bonnet, taking into account that our biennial Assembly cycle left us every other year somewhat less busy in the Secretariat. Why not use the off-Assembly year to organize an event that could be held in a “small” country, at least a country with a small to medium size space program? Roger, whose term had elapsed, had come to the same idea, so we moved ahead with the concept of the Symposium, which the incoming President Giovanni Bignami adopted. The first Symposium was held in 2013 in Thailand and was successful enough that the project was pursued, with Brazil (2015), South Korea (2017) and Israel (in preparation for November 2019 at the time of writing this article).

### **Highs and lows**

Attendance in the Mysore Assembly in 2012, as well as the Assembly in Moscow in 2014, was hampered by the political situation which deterred many researchers from attending. Furthermore, the COSPAR leadership in those years was somewhat less active, and the Council in Moscow elected a new President, Professor Lennard Fisk, the first time ever for an American scientist. Len had a long history of participation in COSPAR, notably as Chair of its Scientific Advisory Committee since its inception in 2006 under Roger’s presidency. Various incidents perturbed the first term of Len as COSPAR President. The site selection for 2018 took place in such a way that the Council had to vote again by correspondence in the fall. But the worst event, unprecedented in COSPAR history, was the heartbreaking cancellation of the 2016 Assembly in Istanbul, just two weeks before its start, due to the military coup which made it impossible to maintain the event, with all space agencies forbidding their staff to travel to Turkey and alarmingly low numbers of registered participants, not to mention the security aspects when military aircraft bombed the presidential palace and tanks blocked bridges across the Bosphorus. This cancellation was the most catastrophic situation I have gone through as COSPAR Executive Director. Recovering from it required enormous efforts from the Secretariat, and I must commend my colleagues Aaron and Leigh Fergus for their tireless work in the following year. Not only had we been working hard for several years in preparation for what promised to be

a memorable COSPAR Assembly, not only had we been denied enjoying Turkish hospitality, scenic views, great food and beautiful artifacts that we had been expecting on top of inspiring scientific events, but we had to overcome an important financial loss and to work twice as much as usual to carry out by electronic means and correspondence what should have been achieved live in Istanbul.

### **Improving COSPAR management**

From the beginning of his first term as President of COSPAR Len Fisk realized that our organization was lacking well-thought out management procedures. Election of the President, selection of the Assembly site, distribution of tasks among Bureau members, functioning of Scientific Commissions and Panels, recruitment of Associated Supporters, etc., all these important moments of COSPAR life were accomplished, while in accordance with the by-laws, in an *ad hoc* manner. Hence the glitches that affected them in the recent years. COSPAR needed an overall update of its mode of operation. This need had already been identified under Roger Bonnet's leadership, resulting in a first update of the by-laws in 2012. Rejuvenating COSPAR was perceived as a real and urgent need. After the successful Scientific Assembly held in Pasadena which marked the full recovery of COSPAR, a new initiative was taken which culminated in December 2018 in Carnon, near Montpellier where the Secretariat had moved in September 2017. A selected group of about 25 people (Bureau members, past COSPAR officers, friendly scientists) contributed over 80 "white papers" on a variety of topics deemed essential to address the sustainability of COSPAR in troubled times and the necessary increase of its influence and impact. This group met for two full days of intense brainstorming and discussion. From the conclusions and recommendations that emerged from this "Strategic Seminar", an Action Plan was designed which is now being implemented. The readers of *Space Research Today* will remember having found a flyer in the August issue of the bulletin in which the COSPAR Principles, Mission and Action Plan were outlined. This short document summarizes the main lines that our organization will follow in the coming years.

### **Time to say good-bye!**



Summarizing the last twelve years of my professional life is not an easy task. It carries a lot of memories and emotion. It is a way to remember the many hours spent in the Secretariat with my two colleagues, trying to do our best to prepare (and later report on) the Scientific Program Committee, Symposium Committee, CSAC and Bureau meetings, to ensure the successful conduct of the Assemblies and Symposia, Council sessions, the publication of our journals, the resolution of the countless incidents that happen in any such gatherings, the distribution of grants to students and scientists in need, to support capacity building workshops, to carefully manage COSPAR's budget, etc. Drawing lessons learned over the years is in no way easier; the future cannot be read in the past. But building the future is a permanent duty, and I am proud and feel rewarded to have worked congenially and effectively with three successive Presidents and my Secretariat colleagues to build a brilliant future for COSPAR.

One major lesson though: combat routine, avoid the repetition of past successful recipes which may prove obsolete, leave way for imagination and innovation, open the door to youth, favor experiments, and above all, take pleasure in new initiatives!

In the good hands of Jean-Claude, my friend and successor, I am quite confident that COSPAR will harvest the successes that its noble mission deserves. May international cooperation in space research and the peaceful uses of outer space be pursued worldwide without impediment from geopolitical tensions and with extended benefits to society!

**Jean-Louis Fellous**