

SIRTF: A Name in Space

Renaming a NASA Observatory

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The Contest

The Space InfraRed Telescope Facility (SIRTF) is a space-borne, cryogenically-cooled infrared observatory capable of studying objects ranging from our Solar System to the distant reaches of the Universe. SIRTF is the final element in NASA's Great Observatories Program, and an important scientific and technical cornerstone of the new Astronomical Search for Origins Program. Following the traditions of the Great Observatories, NASA intends to rename SIRTF before its launch. In order to promote public interest and awareness, the SIRTF Science Center (SSC), on behalf of the SIRTF Project Office at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), has conducted a worldwide public solicitation for possible names for the Observatory. In this poster, we describe how the contest was conducted and present some of the statistics pertaining to the submitted entries.

Method

The contest was open from September 4, 2001 through December 20, 2001. The public was informed of the SIRTF Naming Contest through several channels. Publicity posters were sent to libraries and schools and to Educational Resource Centers across the country. Press releases were distributed to television and radio stations, and to newspapers and magazines that have space-related news and columns. Teachers received email notification, encouraging them to include the contest in their study plans.

Entries were submitted using a Web-based form on the SIRTF public site. Contestants were asked to enter some demographic information, the nominated name, and a 250-word essay to support the name. After submitting the form, the entrant received a SIRTF Naming Contest personalized certificate that could be printed out on the entrant's local printer. Entries and statistics were compiled in a database.

Contest Statistics

More than 6500 entries were received, seeking to rename the Space InfraRed Telescope Facility. In Figure 1, we present the number of entries that were submitted each day. Hundreds of entries were received daily shortly after the contest opened, motivated by a widely-disseminated press release issued by JPL. The dearth of entries around the weekend of September 14-17 was due to a previously scheduled power shutdown at the SIRTF Science Center. Subsequent peaks in the entry rate were due to stories running in newspapers and magazines around the world.

Figure 2 reveals that a quarter of the entries were submitted by females. Figure 3 summarizes the education level of the entrants. Entrants who failed to include any information are denoted by 'other.' Note that at least 25% of the entries originated from K-12 students.

We were curious to determine the geographical distribution of entries. We found that 32 states were represented by more than 25 entries apiece to the contest (Figure 4). The top 10 states were:

1. California (640 submissions)
2. Texas (321)
3. Florida (297)
4. Illinois (214)
5. Pennsylvania (177)
6. Tennessee (166)
7. New York (158)
8. Virginia (145)
9. Massachusetts (125)
10. Colorado (100).

The SIRTf Naming Contest had an international impact as well. More than 2000 submissions were from foreign entries. Twenty-one countries submitted more than 25 entries each. Figure 5 shows the statistics for these countries.

Figure 6 depicts the means by which entrants learned about the contest.

We received more than 400 entries commemorating the events of September 11, 2001, which occurred one week after the opening of our contest. Many of these essays, particularly from overseas, explicitly cite the profound impacts that the United States and/or NASA space exploration have on the world at large. Once the contest concludes, we intend to create an online memorial based on these entries and on the events that have re-shaped our lives.

Evaluation Process

In the first phase of the review process, members of the Office of Education and Public Outreach at the SIRTf Science Center (SSC) will review entries and narrow the eligible candidates to 20 or fewer Semi-Finalist names, and to 10 or fewer essays per candidate name. The initial review will ensure that entries are consistent with the contest rules and meet minimum standards of appropriateness. Moreover, the supporting essays will be evaluated according to their relevance (to the submitted name) and on their originality.

In the second phase of the review, the Semi-Finalist entries (names and supporting essays) will be submitted to a Review Committee. The Committee will be partly comprised of members from the team that is developing SIRTf. It will include Project Office management at JPL, representatives from the industrial partners, and the builders of the SIRTf science instruments. The Committee will also include external members, including teachers and science writers/communicators.

The Review Committee will be asked to select a small number of candidate names. In the likely event that several essays support the same name, the Committee will be asked to select the one or two best essays for each. On behalf of the Committee, the SIRTf Project Office at JPL will submit the final candidate entries to the Office of Space Science at NASA Headquarters.

The third and final phase of process will culminate with the selection of the Observatory name at NASA Headquarters. The NASA Associate Administrator for Public Affairs will make the final selection of the Observatory name, following a recommendation from the Associate Administrator for Space Science.