

ethnos.gr: interview

A technology section article by Tasos Oikonomou

https://www.ethnos.gr/tehnologia/28283_athina-koysteni-sto-ethnosgr-eimaste-sti-hrysi-epohi-toy-diastimatos

Rendered in English by Dimitris Sivyllis from the original article in Greek

<http://www.coustenisplanetologist.com/20190322-Interview-Ethnos-English.pdf>

Athena Coustenis to ethnos.gr:

We find ourselves in the Golden Age of Space Exploration

She excels abroad. She knows our solar system better than most and has dedicated her life to Space.

Read what she told ethnos.gr

“No prophet in one's own native land”, goes the popular saying, but the Argo Awards were conceived for the purpose of turning this saying on its head and honor, within our borders, those who excel beyond them. Athena Coustenis is such an example, as she excels abroad and is regarded as one of the most significant scientists working on the exploration of our solar system and of Space in general, she is the Director of research at the Paris Observatory and a member of several research projects with NASA and with the ESA. Her research focuses on Titan and our solar system and has given at least 500 speeches in international science conferences.

In the evening of Thursday, March 21, 2019, at the Athens Concert Hall, the Megaron, she received the Argo Award for her contribution to science and gave an exclusive interview to ethnos.gr regarding her work and our ...neighborhood in Space.

Q. How do you feel about this honorary distinction?

A. I feel especially honored and happy to receive this award because there can be no substitute for the taste of success in one's own native land. Also, it disproves the saying that “no prophet in one's own native land”. These awards are not only personal but highlight the effort and interest invested by Greeks who live and work abroad to further promote Greece. I want to also emphasize what is self-understood, that women make an important contribution in the realm of science and I thank the committee for the opportunity to offer this ‘reminder’. I also want to emphasize that I would not be where I am today had it not been for the support of relatives and friends and I would not be living my dream, which had always been to explore the mysteries of the universe. We, Greeks, enjoy the good fortune of the ability to count on our family and friends, in contrast with other countries that promote individualism...

Q. Do you believe that these days an important transition is taking place in the race-to-space?

A. We live in a Golden Age of Space Exploration enjoying international as well as European successes like the fruitful missions Rosetta, Cassini-Huygens, Gaia, Exomars, etc. Also, looking towards the future, the European Space Agency is preparing several new programs aimed at research in both planetary science and astronomy. The study of Space is not necessarily a race but an evolving effort that adjusts to the needs and achievements of society. In a world between the United States, Russia and China, in Europe, we nurture a neutral role which allows us to advance our research in partnerships of a wide spectrum. And, no one ignores the impressive forays of the private sector in the exploitation of our immediate neighborhood in Space. Today, NASA collaborates with new players such as Space X and the European Space Agency has also developed communications with industrial partners. In the future, all actors should work together to optimize the return on economic investment of both States and private individuals.

Q. What is your comment on the view that the conditions for the development of scientific research do not exist in Greece?

A. I am always optimistic. Greece and the Greek people have proven, several times, that they have what it takes in terms of resilience and endurance to work and succeed even under the most challenging of conditions. Scientific and educational levels in general, in Greece, are especially high, and at times higher in comparison to other countries, however, unfortunately, some fields of research function in a contradictory environment. Everyone in Greece has faced the (economic) crisis and we have all put in the effort to cope and continue to work constructively. Under the right conditions and processes, Greece can enjoy the prospect of becoming one of the most productive and 'competitive' countries. Unfortunately, the lack of financial resources has resulted, so far, in the technological devaluation of laboratories and the lack of recruitment of research staff, especially of young people. This leads to a downgrading of research.

Despite all this, Greek researches try and succeed in developing collaborations with research teams abroad, which is crucial for the high standard and the completion of research. There are avenues for improvement regarding the financial support and the renewal of research teams for their capacity of promotion abroad, as well as in regard to State support in the form of organizing local and international conferences for the development of scientific research, promoting, at the same time, the presence of Greece in the realm of science. One of these is the COSPAR 2022 which will take place in Greece having achieved a majority in support for the candidacy. I have infinite confidence and appreciation for the Greek scientists in their ability to prove their worth everywhere in the world.

Q. What is the knowledge and feelings that you would like to share with Greeks having observed our planetary system all this while? How far and how close is Space to us?

A. Exploring our planetary system allows us to check on-site the models and theories we develop about how our Solar System was created, how life on Earth emerged and whether life exists elsewhere. For this reason, I became a planetary scientist rather than an astronomer. Quickly, while analyzing data from the Voyager mission during my dissertation, I turned to Titan and its charm never ceased to work on me since then. The mystery surrounding this unique world that resembles our Earth, as well as around the exoplanets, is a compelling aspect of my research.

Space is near and far, recent and ancient, approachable and unreachable. Science fiction films draw their repertoire from discoveries in astronomy. The measurements and experiments of each space mission, however, surpass the imagination of science fiction writers. Besides, the human mind receives stimuli from its environment and Space consists of a vast wealth of varied aspects that almost always give a new dimension to our knowledge and understanding to date. Space teaches us where we come from, how we can protect our planet and how to put our imagination in the service of benefit for everyone.

Q. What is your feeling regarding the search for life in other planets? How close are we to the discovery of significant facts regarding life beyond the Earth?

A. We enjoy some capabilities today to research conditions for the emergence and evolution of life on Earth and other planets with new techniques and space missions that reach further and further away. Among others there is the ESA mission Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (JUICE) which will search for indications of favorable conditions for life in the Jovian satellites, Europa and Ganymede. So far, we have 'listened' to a very narrow field of Space and we have not 'heard' anything yet, which seems to me as something to be expected... Either because there is nothing for us to 'listen' to because there is no extraterrestrial life, or because we are not yet technologically able to receive messages, or even because any extra-terrestrials cannot or do not wish to communicate with us. But we should keep our ears open
