

Light is in the air

The International Day of Light, which will be held on 16 May every year, is a day for celebrating and highlighting the importance of light.

After the successful International Year of Light and Light-based Technologies 2015 (IYL2015), the Executive Board of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has endorsed an annual International Day of Light (IDL). Their press release states “The purpose of an International Day of Light is to provide an annual focal point for the continued appreciation of the central role that light plays in the lives of the citizens in the world in areas of science, culture and art, education, sustainable development, and in fields as diverse as medicine, communications and energy” (go.nature.com/2tQduof).

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With 13,168 events in 147 countries, 23,000 mentions in the media of 120 countries, and 29 countries making special stamps and coins for the event, the IYL2015 has been among UNESCO’s most successful International Years. Under the leadership of UNESCO, the IYL2015 brought together hundreds of national and international partners to implement a wide range of activities worldwide, including awareness raising, capacity building, education and outreach, as well as humanitarian projects. It is estimated that an audience of over 100 million people was reached. Furthermore, many new bridges between science and culture were built, as were new links between decision makers, industry leaders, scientists, non-governmental organizations and the public.

Apart from ensuring follow-up of the achievements of the IYL2015 in raising the profile of science and technology, and its application towards stimulating education and improving the quality of life worldwide, the IDL will also allow improved dialogue between citizens, scientists and policy-makers.

“It’s important to realize that an International Day is actually a permanent and annual recognition of the importance of light science and technology in society, and gives us a chance every year to carry

out actions with a visibility we would not normally be able to achieve, especially at the political level,” said John Dudley from the University of Franche-Comté, France, who was the Steering Committee Chair of the IYL2015 and who is now the Steering Committee Chair of the IDL 2018.

In case you are wondering, 16 May is the anniversary of the first working laser demonstrated in 1960 — the ruby laser developed by Theodore Maiman at Hughes Research Laboratories (*Nature* **187**, 493–494; 1960). Lasers have transformed society through their applications in healthcare and the Internet, and laser science is internationally recognized, with over 20 related Nobel prizes having been awarded. Although 16 May is a scientific anniversary, the IDL is not just a day to celebrate purely the science of light, but also the wider impact of light on society. “It fits in perfectly with promoting the broader goals of UNESCO because lasers and associated technologies are used in healthcare, agriculture, communications, education, entertainment and cultural pursuits, and even allow studies of broader areas in the arts and humanities such as studying historical artefacts and manuscripts,” Dudley pointed out.

The logo of the IDL has incorporated the logo of the Sustainable Development Goals (go.nature.com/2vjEJVVW) — an initiative of the United Nations comprising 17 goals to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity — to emphasize that science applied to sustainable development is central to the IDL.

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The IDL will be announced officially at the 39th session of the General Conference of UNESCO that will be held from 7–22 November 2017, and the first celebration of the IDL will take place on 16 May 2018 when an official inauguration ceremony will take place at the headquarters of UNESCO in Paris, involving



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presentations from Nobel laureates, scientists, industry leaders, as well as a from a wide range of other partners from sectors including art, architecture, lighting, design and non-governmental organizations. The official website of the IDL is now online (www.lightday.org) and the full website will be online in November 2017.

“It may in fact be the case that UNESCO will choose to select particular themes for celebration every year, but these details are being worked out now,” said Dudley, who also disclosed that “for 2018 and in the near future, I think that one primary theme will be photonics and light for sustainable development.” Dudley also emphasized that the photonics community will always be able to find a way to participate.

“Personally, one of the things I am most pleased about post-IYL2015 is to see how the role optics can play in addressing issues of poverty and equality is now appreciated so widely, and I think an annual celebration of light under the banner of UNESCO is a wonderful way to ensure that this remains a priority for the photonics community in the future,” Dudley remarked. □