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BEYOND THE MILKY WAY VR

CASE STUDY



International
Centre for
Radio
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Research





BEYOND THE MILKY WAY VR

An ICRAR-supported virtual reality documentary is showcasing West Australian science and landscapes to global audiences.

The Beyond the Milky Way documentary uses virtual reality headsets to transport viewers to the heart of the Murchison—an ancient landscape and the future home of the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) telescope.

It's an immersive 360-degree experience that explores Western Australia's role in one of the biggest scientific endeavours ever undertaken.

The film was made by independent WA production company White Spark Pictures and launched at the WA Museum Boola Bardip in December 2021.

White Spark Pictures founder and creative director Briège Whitehead says ICRAR's outreach team approached the company about using virtual reality to showcase the remote SKA site.

"We said 'absolutely, we'd love to create our next VR documentary about the future SKA and WA and put it on the map,'" she says. "It was a natural fit for us."

Whitehead garnered backing for the idea from principal funding partners Screenwest and Screen Australia, as well as support from the WA Museum.

ICRAR helped to secure support from other stakeholders including the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources, CSIRO, the Pawsey Supercomputing Research Centre, Scitech and Inspiring Australia, SKA Observatory and ASTRO 3D.

The documentary was filmed at the remote telescope site in 2021, using specialised 360° cameras capable of extreme resolution.



ICRAR also assisted with logistics, site liaison and astrophotography for the project.

The final film, narrated by Brian Cox, takes a deep dive into the international effort to build the SKA.

Guided by CSIRO's Aboriginal Liaison Officer Leonie Boddington and ICRAR astronomers Professor Cathryn Trott and Dr Natasha Hurley-Walker, the documentary allows viewers to stand on the future site of the telescope and journey to the edges of the Universe.

Whitehead says ICRAR's support was enormously important to the film's success.

"We don't want to be making a project that's inaccurate in any way, so we've relied on ICRAR and other stakeholders' feedback for scientific accuracy," she says. "They're a really great supporting partner."

Two of the four experts on screen are also ICRAR astronomers.

"They're wonderful," Whitehead says. "Having really good communicators on screen is a pivotal part in being a successful film and the storytelling coming across well."

After a successful season in Perth, the film will now tour regional Western Australia, the rest of Australia, Europe, the UK and the US, largely through museums.

In 2022, the Australian Embassy in Paris also screened the documentary to SKA stakeholders and the general public.

Beyond the Milky Way is White Spark Pictures' second virtual reality documentary, following their award-winning production The Antarctica Experience.

The film is one of the top 10 highest-grossing, theatrically released Australian documentaries ever made.

Beyond the Milky Way will feed back into ICRAR's outreach initiatives, with a proportion of the film's proceeds returned to fund education and outreach activities.

White Spark Pictures has also made the documentary available to participants of some of the centre's outreach programs, including school students.

"It's also nice that we can feed back into ICRAR's outreach program, and we can help support that in turn," Whitehead says.

Far Left Prototype antennas for the SKA telescope in Australia.

Top Professor Cathryn Trott being mic'd up by the White Spark Pictures crew at the Murchison Radio-astronomy Observatory.

