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APOLLO MOONWALKER TO OPEN AUSSIE SPACE CONFERENCE

Thirty years since he set foot on the Moon, Apollo 17 astronaut Dr. Harrison Schmitt is flying Down Under in July 2002 to open the Australian Mars Exploration Conference (AMEC) in Sydney and embark on an Australian tour to promote the past, present and future of space exploration. The presence in this country of Dr. Schmitt, who holds the distinction of being the only scientist to have set foot on the moon, will also help to focus attention on the potential for greater Australian participation in science and technology in the 21st century. It is also timely in the wake of renewed interest in human space travel– this time to Mars.

Mars Society Australia is coordinating the non-profit tour, which PR Director Jennifer Laing says “will provide Australians with a rare opportunity to draw knowledge and inspiration from Dr. Schmitt’s unique background and experiences. You could call him a ‘living legend’ of the space age, one of a handful who have actually walked on the moon. We are extremely lucky to have secured a high-profile and distinguished visitor like Dr. Schmitt to open our annual conference in July, and his Australian tour is an added bonus, which will see him address many groups and organizations across the country.”

During the Apollo 17 mission in December 1972, Dr Schmitt and fellow crewmember Commander Gene Cernan spent a record 75 hours on the lunar surface. They were the last men to walk on the moon. In the course of their 3-day lunar odyssey, Schmitt and Cernan set up scientific experiments and navigated to nearby mountains in their lunar buggy, collecting rock and soil samples. They returned to earth with a record 113 kg of lunar material.

After the mission, Dr Schmitt played an active role in documenting the Apollo geologic results and left NASA in 1975 to serve a six-year term as a United States Senator representing New Mexico. He now consults in business, geology, space, and public policy, and is Adjunct Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he lectures in Space Resources. Dr Schmitt’s experience and insights are highly respected within the U.S. and in the international aerospace community.

AMEC is the second annual conference of Mars Society Australia (MSA), which was incorporated in 2001 and affiliated with the international organization known as The Mars Society, founded by Dr. Robert Zubrin and based in Colorado, USA. The Mars Society operates a series of human Mars mission simulation platforms around the world, and engages in public education and outreach about the possibilities for future human Mars exploration. MSA has initiated its own technical programme of research, and is seeking funding in the order of \$500,000 - \$700,000 to build a Mars Australian Research Station (Mars-Oz) in the Outback to assist in the design of future Martian missions and make Mars exploration more real for Australians.

AMEC 2002 has the theme ‘Exploring the Red Planet’ and will bring together engineers, scientists and all those with an interest in Mars exploration, research and science from around Australia and overseas. Registrations are now open, with details on the MSA Website (<http://www.marssociety.org.au>). Highlights of AMEC 2002 will include “An Evening with an Apollo Astronaut” gala dinner at Sydney’s Corus Hotel, and a Discussion Panel ‘Lessons for Mars Missions from Project Apollo’ featuring Australian scientists, Professor Stuart Ross Taylor and Professor David Green, who analysed the original lunar samples – and the only scientist who helped collect them – Dr. Harrison Schmitt.

“You can also find out the latest on Mars research both here and overseas, with speakers covering topics such as space tethers, the effect of microgravity on astronaut health, robotics and Martian

geology,” said Jennifer Laing. “This research has been given a boost in the wake of the reported discovery of water on Mars and the growing likelihood of a mission to Mars before 2020. Given our central location at the Faculty of Engineering at Sydney University, modest registration fees, and high-profile speakers, we are expecting a high degree of interest in AMEC 2002 and healthy attendance figures. This will give Mars Society Australia the leverage it needs to continue with its innovative space research programs.”

During Dr. Schmitt’s visit (6-20 July), he will carry out a number of engagements, including an address to the National Press Club in Canberra, public lectures at La Trobe University in Melbourne, the University of Sydney, the Australian National University in Canberra and the University of Queensland in Brisbane, as well as school visits and presentations at three scientific conferences. Aside from his presence at AMEC 2002, as guest speaker at the conference dinner on Friday 12 July and opening keynote speaker on Saturday 13 July, he will address the Australian Institute of Physics Congress at Darling Harbour and the Bioastronomy 2002 conference on Hamilton Island. A copy of his program will be available shortly on the MSA Website.

“We have deliberately chosen a wide variety of engagements and events for Dr. Schmitt to attend,” said AMEC coordinator Michael West. “We wanted him to talk in particular to young people where possible, as we feel space is one of the best ways of motivating our children to seek careers in science and engineering, fostering high technology industries and challenging our best and brightest with local opportunities.

“2002 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the last manned moon mission, on which Dr. Schmitt was the lunar module pilot. Since that time, no human has ventured beyond Low Earth Orbit, although it now looks like a manned mission to Mars is back on NASA’s agenda. Those who walked on the moon have a fascinating story to tell, which we feel will capture the imagination of many Australians.

“Mars Society Australia hopes in this way to highlight Australia’s ability to take on a greater role in space activities, and promote a high-tech future for the next generation.”

Media inquiries and requests for interviews regarding the Australian Mars Exploration Conference and the associated Australian tour of Dr. Harrison Schmitt should be directed to: Jennifer Laing, Public Relations Director, Mars Society Australia - ph 0417 135 113 or email: pr@marsociety.org.au

For further information on Mars Society Australia or the Australian Mars Exploration Conference 2002, visit <http://www.marsociety.org.au>.