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Why we should get into space

AS THE space shuttle Discovery touched down safely on Tuesday night, few nations were prouder than Australia.

After all, on board was home-grown astronaut Andy Thomas, who was born in South Australia and studied engineering at the University of Adelaide before joining the space program.

But the truth is Australia has little to boast about when it comes to space exploration and space science in recent years.

As Thomas himself pointed out, his role on Discovery was as an American citizen, not an Australian.

"It's a tragedy Australia is not actively involved in this program," he told *The Sun-Herald*.

"I don't wear an Australian flag on my flight suit because Australia doesn't support me or sponsor me."

Thomas has long lamented the lack of Australian involvement in projects such as the International Space Station, and called for increased Federal Government funding for space research, which is miserly. He is right to do so.

Despite Australia becoming the fourth nation in the world to launch a satellite with WRESAT in 1967, our involvement in space has been humble since.

While nations such as Canada, the Netherlands, Italy, Thailand, Japan and Germany press ahead with successful space programs, we have no dedicated space agency.

FedSat, which in 2002 became our first satellite launch in more than 30 years, is in regular danger of losing funding, despite its work on space science, communications and computing.

Iver Cairns, chair of the Australian Academy of Science's National Committee for Space Science, says there are many reasons to conduct space research.

Space travel inspires humanity to achieve

First, it could have direct impacts on our quality of life. Solar flares and space weather create disturbances in the upper atmosphere which can affect communications, financial transactions and power generation on Earth. They may have an impact on the delicate ozone layer.

On a grander scale, space research, such as the recent Deep Impact comet mission and the landing on Saturn's moon, Titan, teach us about the origins of our solar system and the universe.

Monitoring comets and asteroids through space may one day enable man to prevent a collision with Earth.

The planned manned Mars missions also open the way for the astounding possibility that humans will colonise other parts of our solar system.

Finally, space travel inspires humanity to achieve. Cairns argues that Australia occupies nearly one-eighth of the planet, and our protection and development of that area should include space research.

And, on a less altruistic note, consider this: spin-off technologies from space programs have ranged from miniaturised pacemakers to the coating on modern sunglasses.

Perhaps \$10 million a year could result in Australia launching and developing a sophisticated regional satellite and funding some major space projects.

Andy Thomas says the first step could be signing up for a role on the International Space Station. If his advice is heeded, perhaps the next generation of Australians in space will proudly wear their own flag on their space suits.