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Smithsonian offers a view from above

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An undated photograph shows Earth's streetlights at night.

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Science and art merge in a stunning new Smithsonian exhibition featuring planet Earth as seen from above.

Some of the satellite images show the home planet as only astronauts can see it, others taken with special instruments show things even they can't see.

There's a myth that the Great Wall of China is the only manmade object that can be seen from space, but that's not true, explains exhibit curator Andrew K. Johnston. And he proves it, pointing out satellite images of the Great Pyramids, downtown San Francisco, New Orleans while flooded by Hurricane Katrina, container ships in the harbor of Hamburg, Germany, and a nighttime view of the globe showing city lights.

Johnston, a geographer at the National Air and Space Museum, organized the exhibit, which opens Saturday. It will remain at the Air and Space Museum until January 7 and then begin a tour of cities around the country.

The images were made by a variety of satellites operated by government and private companies. Most of the satellites circle the globe at around 600 miles altitude; captions on each picture show the satellite that took it.

One unique shot shows Mount Taranaki, New Zealand, surrounded by what looks like a circular shadow. It turns out to be Egmont National Park, which was created by drawing a circle around the mountain. The dark area inside the circle is forest reserve, the lighter

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surrounding lands are farms.

For folks who have vacationed in the Caribbean, there's a view of those islands highlighting the shallow water around them and the darker deep water nearby.

For residents of colder climes there's a picture of the Great Lakes, vividly illustrating the lake-effect snowstorms that plague the region.

Clouds blowing along the ocean break into great swirls and twists where islands reach up into them, images reminiscent of the bow-wave of a giant vessel.

Also evoking the ocean are wave after wave of sand in Yemen, contrasting with blue rocky land nearby. The picture is said to include the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, though in this uninhabited area that line has yet to be surveyed.

An image that would please Benjamin Franklin clearly shows the warm waters of the Gulf Stream moving across the Atlantic. It was Franklin who first suggested such a current existed, moderating the climate of Europe.

Perhaps the most striking image is the multicolor picture of the great delta of the River Lena in Siberia. The dark blue river divides into twists and turns and threads through the green land in this summer view of the area.

And speaking of rivers, the Nile Valley glows with light in a composite nighttime image of the Eastern Hemisphere. The great cities of Europe -- London, Paris, Madrid, Berlin -- sparkle, it's possible to trace railroad lines in Russia, and at the far edge Japan is a bright crescent.

Most of the images in the exhibit come from Johnston's 2004 book "Earth From Space," though new ones, such as flooded New Orleans, have been added.

The exhibit tour is being organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, which makes a variety of the museum's collections available to institutions across the country. Not all dates have been finalized but the tour will include visits to Rome, Georgia; Hampton, Virginia; Las Vegas, Nevada; Cedar Falls, Iowa; and Spartanburg, South Carolina.

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Allen concedes defeat, Dems control Senate

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