

## **Constellations**

*A reading about Constellations taken from the State of Utah Science  
Teacher Resource Book, 2005, page 11.2.12*

Constellations are patterns of stars visible from Earth in the sky at night. The stars in any given constellation form a pattern only as they appear from Earth and are usually many light years apart from each other. Although the positions of the constellations as they appear in the sky change over the course of a year, they are constant and predictable from year to year.

Many ancient civilizations organized the sky into constellation patterns. They associated these star patterns with stories or images of mythological creatures and heroes. The particular stars grouped into an individual constellation varied from one civilization to another. More than half of the constellations recognized today were identified by the ancient Greeks.

Constellations were more than just interesting patterns in the sky. The rising or setting of particular constellations was used to determine both the time of night and the season of the year. They were used to determine when to plant crops. Seafaring people used stars for navigation. Using stars for navigation continues today. As Earth revolves around the sun, the visible constellations change from season to season. Particular constellations are associated with the various seasons. Circumpolar constellations such as Ursa Major (Big Dipper) are visible throughout the year as they appear to revolve around Polaris (North Star).

Constellations are used as referenced points on a star map to help people communicate with each other concerning the locations of various objects in the night sky such as the moon, planets, stars, comets, meteor showers, etc. In 1930, the International Astronomical Union established eighty-eight constellations with precise boundaries.