

Science Justification

The large scale structure of our local universe is dominated by voids and filamentary structures of groups and clusters of galaxies (e.g., Courtois et al. 2013). Half of the Local Volume galaxies reside in loose groups and associations, such as the Sculptor filament and the Canes Venatici Cloud (Karachenstev 2005). The nearest such structure is the NGC 3109 association (see Figure 1), an association of 5 dwarf galaxies in Leo, Sextans, and Antlia (van den Bergh 1999; Tully et al. 2006). This galaxy association, with a linear extent of 1.2 Mpc across the sky (Bellazzini et al. 2013), lies just at the edge of the Local Group at a distance of 1.3–1.7 Mpc. The origin of the NGC 3109 association is discussed in detail by Pawlowski & McGaugh (2014), who identify several possibilities: an infalling dark matter filament, a pre-existing group tidally stretched by an encounter with the MW, or galaxies formed as tidal dwarfs from a past Milky Way/M31 encounter. Constraining the number and properties of additional group members can help to discriminate between these possibilities as well as confirm or refute the suggestion by Pawlowski & McGaugh (2014) that *all* of the non-satellite galaxies to the north of the Milky Way are confined to a single plane.

The time is right for a search for additional members of the NGC 3109 association. While the region is covered by existing and planned survey data, none are deep enough to detect the faint galaxies and structures at this distance. The most well-known recent examples of nearby dwarf galaxy discovery are from the SDSS (e.g., Koposov et al. 2008). However, despite lying within the SDSS footprint, the newest member of the NGC 3109 association, Leo P, was recently discovered as part of a blind H I survey (Giovanelli et al. 2013): it is simply too faint to be well-detected at the SDSS depth ($g = 22.2$, $i = 21.3$). Using LBT imaging of Leo P, McQuinn et al. (2013) measured the tip of its red giant branch to be at $i = 22.1$. Further south, tidal substructure near the Antlia dwarf suggestive of an interaction with NGC 3109 was recently discovered by Penny et al. (2012), at very low surface brightness levels. This suggests to us that additional faint members of the group as well as tidal debris from interactions between group members may await discovery.

The outcome of a search for additional members of the NGC 3109 association has implications for understanding galaxy evolution. A lack of additional tidal debris could cast doubt on the ‘tidal dwarf’ explanation for the group’s existence, while a lack of additional bound-galaxy members of the group would strongly constrain the mass of a possible dark-matter filament or progenitor halo. On the other hand, finding additional members of the group would allow a better characterization of its spatial and dynamical extent; with only five currently-identified members, such studies suffer from small-number statistics. If additional group members lie close to the same plane as the existing members, this would tend to confirm the result of Pawlowski & McGaugh (2014). Identification of new members as potential ‘backsplash galaxies’ (Teyssier et al. 2012) could also lend credence to Pawlowski & McGaugh’s claim that there is an ‘overabundant backsplash galaxy’ problem with Λ CDM. Additional group members would also allow better constraints on the group’s luminosity function and subsequent comparison to CDM simulations of galaxy formation in low-density environments. Using a Local Group formation simulation, Benítez-Llambay et al. (2013) suggested that gas removal through stripping by the ‘cosmic web’ of filaments and pancakes could explain the diversity of properties of local dwarf galaxies; identification of additional galaxies possibly associated with a filament could provide additional tests of this idea.

We propose here to map the northern portion of the NGC 3109 filament with CFHT/MegaCam. Deeper imaging than the available SDSS data ($g = 22.2$, $i = 21.3$) is required in order to detect dwarf galaxies at distances beyond 1 Mpc. CFHT/MegaCam’s ability to go both wide and deep is essential for such observations: the nearby nature of the filament means that it covers a large area of sky, yet the expected faint dwarf galaxies are resolved into individual stars. The area to be

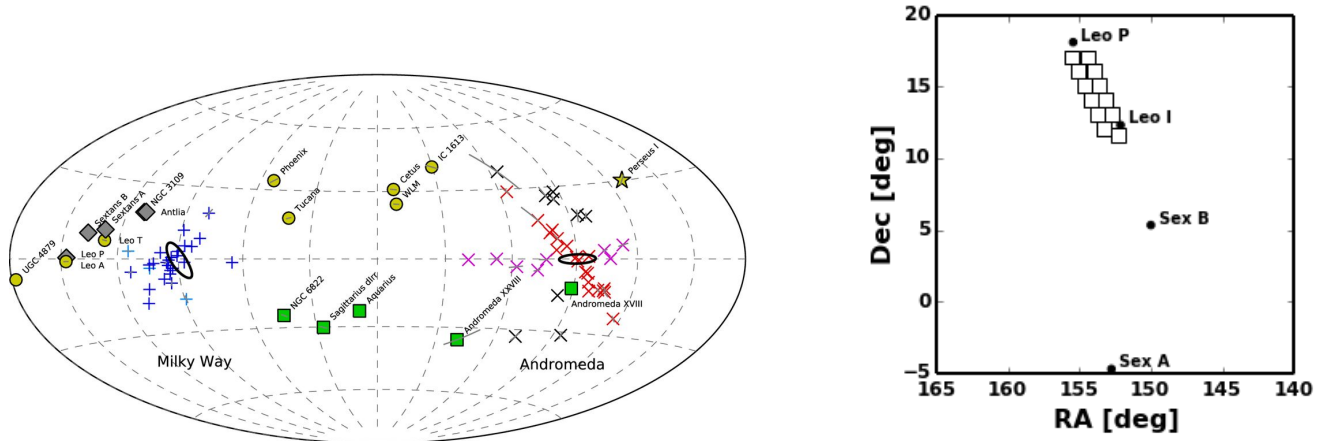


Figure 1: (Left) From Pawlowski & McGaugh (2014): Local Group galaxies on the sky as seen from a position half-way between M31 and the Milky Way. The NGC 3109 association members are shown as grey diamonds. (Right) Sky projection of the proposed observations. The boxes are 1-degree MegaCam fields; the black circles at the galaxy locations have 15-arcminute radii.

mapped, defined by the direction from Leo P to Sextans A/B, happens to pass quite close to the more nearby (240 kpc) Local Group dSph Leo I. Peñarrubia et al. (2009) predicted the location of a tidal break in this galaxy’s surface brightness profile which is beyond the radius most recently mapped (Sohn et al. 2007); we can also use the MegaCam imaging to probe the outer reaches of Leo I and test this prediction.

The goal of this proposal is to complete the substructure census and probe the faint end of the luminosity function in a portion of the nearest filamentary structure in the universe. Detected structures will be characterized in terms of structural properties and their association to the sub-group will be pursued via tip-of-the-red-giant-branch (TRGB; Lee et al. 1993) measurements and, where possible, spectroscopic measurements (eg with Gemini/GMOS). Multi-wavelength follow-up can be pursued with the ALFALFA HI survey and other wide-area surveys. Identifying galaxies through their stars is still the key first step, and MegaCam observations are the right tool for understanding the NGC 3109 filament.

References

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