

15.4: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain why spaceships from extraterrestrial civilizations are unlikely to have visited us
- List efforts by humankind to communicate with other civilizations via messages on spacecraft
- Understand the various SETI programs scientists are undertaking

Given all the developments discussed in this chapter, it seems likely that life could have developed on many planets around other stars. Even if that life is microbial, we saw that we may soon have ways to search for chemical biosignatures. This search is of fundamental importance for understanding biology, but it does not answer the question, “Are we alone?” that we raised at the beginning of this chapter. When we ask this question, many people think of other intelligent creatures, perhaps beings that have developed technology similar to our own. If any intelligent, technical civilizations have arisen, as has happened on Earth in the most recent blink of cosmic time, how could we make contact with them?

This problem is similar to making contact with people who live in a remote part of Earth. If students in the United States want to converse with students in Australia, for example, they have two choices. Either one group gets on an airplane and travels to meet the other, or they communicate by sending a message remotely. Given how expensive airline tickets are, most students would probably select the message route.

In the same way, if we want to get in touch with intelligent life around other stars, we can travel, or we can try to exchange messages. Because of the great distances involved, interstellar space travel would be very slow and prohibitively expensive. The fastest spacecraft the human species has built so far would take almost 80,000 years to get to the nearest star. While we could certainly design a faster craft, the more quickly we require it to travel, the greater the energy cost involved. To reach neighboring stars in less than a human life span, we would have to travel close to the speed of light. In that case, however, the expense would become truly astronomical.

Interstellar Travel

Bernard Oliver, an engineer with an abiding interest in life elsewhere, made a revealing calculation about the costs of rapid interstellar space travel. Since we do not know what sort of technology we (or other civilizations) might someday develop, Oliver considered a trip to the nearest star (and back again) in a spaceship with a “perfect engine”—one that would convert its fuel into energy with 100% efficiency. Even with a perfect engine, the energy cost of a single round-trip journey at 70% the speed of light turns out to be equivalent to several hundred thousand years’ worth of total U.S. electrical energy consumption. The cost of such travel is literally out of this world.

This is one reason astronomers are so skeptical about claims that UFOs are spaceships from extraterrestrial civilizations. Given the distance and energy expense involved, it seems unlikely that the dozens of UFOs (and even UFO abductions) claimed each year could be visitors from other stars so fascinated by Earth civilization that they are willing to expend fantastically large amounts of energy or time to reach us. Nor does it seem credible that these visitors have made this long and expensive journey and then systematically avoided contacting our governments or political and intellectual leaders.

Not every UFO report has been explained (in many cases, the observations are sketchy or contradictory). But investigation almost always converts them to IFOs (identified flying objects) or NFOs (not-at-all flying objects). While some are hoaxes, others are natural phenomena, such as bright planets, ball lightning, fireballs (bright meteors), or even flocks of birds that landed in an oil slick to make their bellies reflective. Still others are human craft, such as private planes with some lights missing, or secret military aircraft. It is also interesting that the group of people who most avidly look at the night sky, the amateur astronomers, have never reported UFO sightings. Further, not a single UFO has ever left behind any physical evidence that can be tested in a laboratory and shown to be of nonterrestrial origin.

Another common aspect of belief that aliens are visiting Earth comes from people who have difficulty accepting human accomplishments. There are many books and TV shows, for example, that assert that humans could not have built the great pyramids of Egypt, and therefore they must have been built by aliens. The huge statues (called Moai) on Easter Island are also sometimes claimed to have been built by aliens. Some people even think that the accomplishments of space exploration today are based on alien technology.

However, the evidence from archaeology and history is clear: ancient monuments were built by ancient *people*, whose brains and ingenuity were every bit as capable as ours are today, even if they didn't have electronic textbooks like you do.

Messages on Spacecraft

While space travel by living creatures seems very difficult, robot probes can travel over long distances and over long periods of time. Five spacecraft—two Pioneers, two Voyagers, and New Horizons—are now leaving the solar system. At their coasting speeds, they will take hundreds of thousands or millions of years to get anywhere close to another star. On the other hand, they were the first products of human technology to go beyond our home system, so we wanted to put messages on board to show where they came from.

Each Pioneer carries a plaque with a pictorial message engraved on a gold-anodized aluminum plate (Figure 15.4.1). The Voyagers, launched in 1977, have audio and video records attached, which allowed the inclusion of over 100 photographs and a selection of music from around the world. Given the enormous space between stars in our section of the Galaxy, it is very unlikely that these messages will ever be received by anyone. They are more like a note in a bottle thrown into the sea by a shipwrecked sailor, with no realistic expectation of its being found soon but a slim hope that perhaps someday, somehow, someone will know of the sender's fate.

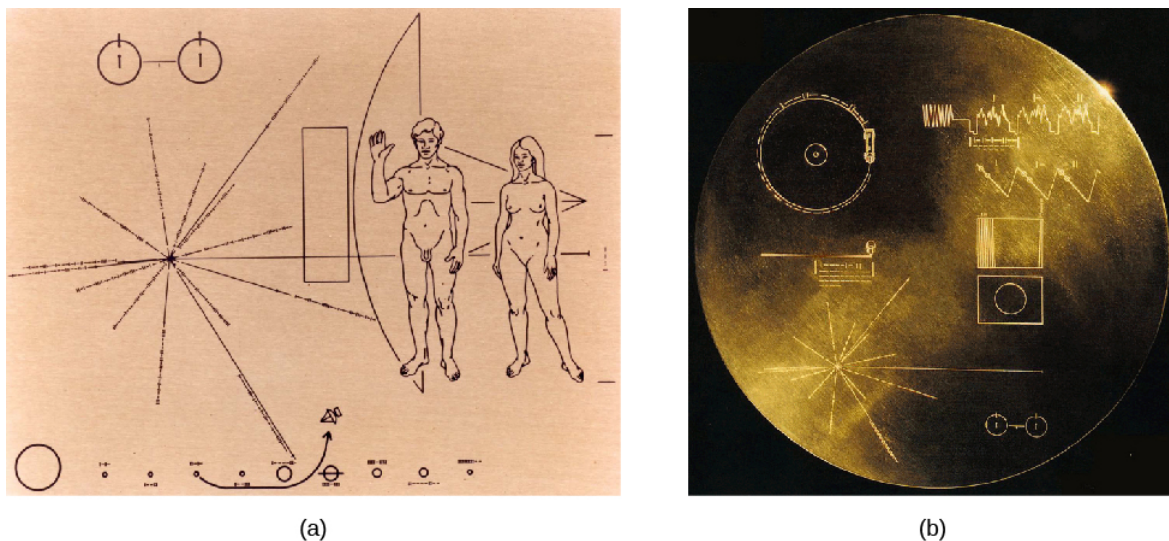


Figure 15.4.1 Interstellar Messages. (a) This is the image engraved on the plaques aboard the Pioneer 10 and 11 spacecraft. The human figures are drawn in proportion to the spacecraft, which is shown behind them. The Sun and planets in the solar system can be seen at the bottom, with the trajectory that the spacecraft followed. The lines and markings in the left center show the positions and pulse periods for a number of pulsars, which might help locate the spacecraft's origins in space and time. (b) Encoded onto a gold-coated copper disk, the Voyager record contains 118 photographs, 90 minutes of music from around the world, greetings in almost 60 languages, and other audio material. It is a summary of the sights and sounds of Earth.

The Voyager message

An Excerpt from the Voyager Record:

"We cast this message into the cosmos. It is likely to survive a billion years into our future, when our civilization is profoundly altered. . . . If [another] civilization intercepts Voyager and can understand these recorded contents, here is our message:

This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts, and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours. We hope, someday, having solved the problems we face, to join a community of galactic civilizations. This record represents our hope and our determination, and our goodwill in a vast and awesome universe."

—Jimmy Carter, President of the United States of America, June 16, 1977

Communicating with the Stars

If direct visits among stars are unlikely, we must turn to the alternative for making contact: exchanging messages. Here the news is a lot better. We already use a messenger—light or, more generally, electromagnetic waves—that moves through space at the fastest

speed in the universe. Traveling at 300,000 kilometers per second, light reaches the nearest star in only 4 years and does so at a tiny fraction of the cost of sending material objects. These advantages are so clear and obvious that we assume they will occur to any other species of intelligent beings that develop technology.

However, we have access to a wide spectrum of electromagnetic radiation, ranging from the longest-wavelength radio waves to the shortest-wavelength gamma rays. Which would be the best for interstellar communication? It would not be smart to select a wavelength that is easily absorbed by interstellar gas and dust, or one that is unlikely to penetrate the atmosphere of a planet like ours. Nor would we want to pick a wavelength that has lots of competition for attention in our neighborhood.

One final criterion makes the selection easier: we want the radiation to be inexpensive enough to produce in large quantities. When we consider all these requirements, radio waves turn out to be the best answer. Being the lowest-frequency (and lowest-energy) band of the spectrum, they are not very expensive to produce, and we already use them extensively for communications on Earth. They are not significantly absorbed by interstellar dust and gas. With some exceptions, they easily pass through Earth's atmosphere and through the atmospheres of the other planets we are acquainted with.

The Cosmic Haystack

Having made the decision that radio is the most likely means of communication among intelligent civilizations, we still have many questions and a daunting task ahead of us. Shall we *send* a message, or try to *receive* one? Obviously, if every civilization decides to receive only, then no one will be sending, and everyone will be disappointed. On the other hand, it may be appropriate for us to *begin* by listening, since we are likely to be among the most primitive civilizations in the Galaxy who are interested in exchanging messages.

We do not make this statement to insult the human species (which, with certain exceptions, we are rather fond of). Instead, we base it on the fact that humans have had the ability to receive (or send) a radio message across interstellar distances for only a few decades. Compared to the ages of the stars and the Galaxy, this is a mere instant. If there are civilizations out there that are ahead of us in development by even a short time (in the cosmic sense), they are likely to have a technology head start of many, many years.

In other words, we, who have just started, may well be the “youngest” species in the Galaxy with this capability (see the discussion in Example 15.4.1 below). Just as the youngest members of a community are often told to be quiet and listen to their elders for a while before they say something foolish, so may we want to begin our exercise in extraterrestrial communication by listening.

Even restricting our activities to listening, however, leaves us with an array of challenging questions. For example, if an extraterrestrial civilization's signal is too weak to be detected by our present-day radio telescopes, we will not detect them. In addition, it would be very expensive for an extraterrestrial civilization to broadcast on a huge number of channels. Most likely, they select one or a few channels for their particular message. Communicating on a narrow band of channels also helps distinguish an artificial message from the radio static that comes from natural cosmic processes. But the radio band contains an astronomically large number of possible channels. How can we know in advance which one they have selected, and how they have coded their message into the signal?

Table 15.4.1 summarizes these and other factors that scientists must grapple with when trying to tune in to radio messages from distant civilizations. Because their success depends on either guessing right about so many factors or searching through all the possibilities for each factor, some scientists have compared their quest to looking for a needle in a haystack. Thus, they like to say that the list of factors in Table 15.4.1 defines the *cosmic haystack problem*.

Table 15.4.1: The Cosmic Haystack Problem: Some Questions about an Extraterrestrial Message

Factors
From which direction (which star) is the message coming?
On what channels (or frequencies) is the message being broadcast?
How wide in frequency is the channel?
How strong is the signal (can our radio telescopes detect it)?
Is the signal continuous, or does it shut off at times (as, for example, a lighthouse beam does when it turns away from us)?
Does the signal drift (change) in frequency because of the changing relative motion of the source and the receiver?

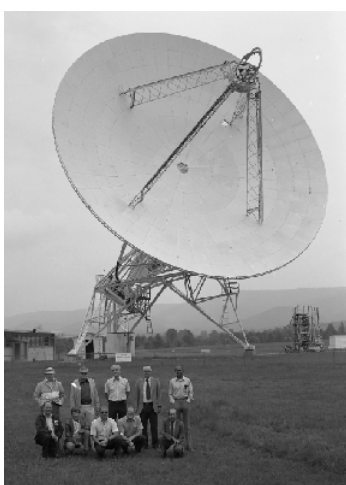
Table 15.4.1: The Cosmic Haystack Problem: Some Questions about an Extraterrestrial Message

Factors
How is the message encoded in the signal (how do we decipher it)?
Can we even recognize a message from a completely alien species? Might it take a form we don't at all expect?

Radio Searches

Although the cosmic haystack problem seems daunting, many other research problems in astronomy also require a large investment of time, equipment, and patient effort. And, of course, if we don't search, we're sure not to find anything.

The very first search was conducted by astronomer Frank Drake in 1960, using the 85-foot antenna at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (Figure 15.4.2). Called Project Ozma, after the queen of the exotic Land of Oz in the children's stories of L. Frank Baum, his experiment involved looking at about 7200 channels and two nearby stars over a period of 200 hours. Although he found nothing, Drake demonstrated that we had the technology to do such a search, and set the stage for the more sophisticated projects that followed.



(a)



(b)

Figure 15.4.2 Project Ozma and the Allen Telescope Array. (a) This 25th anniversary photo shows some members of the Project Ozma team standing in front of the 85-foot radio telescope with which the 1960 search for extraterrestrial messages was performed. Frank Drake is in the back row, second from the right. (b) The Allen Telescope Array in California is made up of 42 small antennas linked together. This system allows simultaneous observations of multiple sources with millions of separate frequency channels.

Receivers are constantly improving, and the sensitivity of SETI programs—**SETI** stands for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence—is advancing rapidly. Equally important, modern electronics and software allow simultaneous searches on millions of frequencies (channels). If we can thus cover a broad frequency range, the cosmic haystack problem of guessing the right frequency largely goes away. One powerful telescope array (funded with an initial contribution from Microsoft founder Paul Allen) that is built for SETI searches is the Allen Telescope in Northern California. Other radio telescopes being used for such searches include the giant Arecibo radio dish in Puerto Rico, the recently completed, and even larger, FAST dish in China, and the Green Bank Telescope in West Virginia, which is the largest steerable radio telescope in the world.

What kind of signals do we hope to pick up? We on Earth are inadvertently sending out a flood of radio signals, dominated by military radar systems. This is a kind of leakage signal, similar to the wasted light energy that is beamed upward by poorly designed streetlights and advertising signs. Could we detect a similar leakage of radio signals from another civilization? The answer is just barely, but only for the nearest stars. For the most part, therefore, current radio SETI searches are looking for beacons, assuming that civilizations might be intentionally drawing attention to themselves or perhaps sending a message to another world or outpost that lies in our direction. Our prospects for success depend on how often civilizations arise, how long they last, and how patient they are about broadcasting their locations to the cosmos.

Jill Tarter: trying to make contact

1997 was quite a year for Jill Cornell Tarter (Figure 15.4.3), one of the world's leading scientists in the SETI field. The SETI Institute announced that she would be the recipient of its first endowed chair (the equivalent of an endowed research professorship) named in honor of Bernard Oliver. The National Science Foundation approved a proposal by a group of scientists and educators she headed to develop an innovative hands-on high school curriculum based on the ideas of cosmic evolution (the topics of this chapter). And, at roughly the same time, she was being besieged with requests for media interviews as news reports identified her as the model for Ellie Arroway, the protagonist of *Contact*, Carl Sagan's best-selling novel about SETI. The book had been made into a high-budget science fiction film, starring Jodie Foster, who had talked with Tarter before taking the role.



Figure 15.4.3 Jill Tarter

Tarter is quick to point out, “Carl Sagan wrote a book about a woman who does what I do, not about me.” Still, as the only woman in such a senior position in the small field of SETI, she was the center of a great deal of public attention. (However, colleagues and reporters pointed out that this was nothing compared to what would happen if her search for radio signals from other civilizations recorded a success.)

Being the only woman in a group is not a new situation to Tarter, who often found herself the only woman in her advanced science or math classes. Her father had encouraged her, both in her interest in science and her “tinkering.” As an undergraduate at Cornell University, she majored in engineering physics. That training became key to putting together and maintaining the complex systems that automatically scan for signals from other civilizations.

Switching to astrophysics for her graduate studies, she wrote a PhD thesis that, among other topics, considered the formation of failed stars—those whose mass was not sufficient to ignite the nuclear reactions that power more massive stars like our own Sun. Tarter coined the term “brown dwarf” for these small, dim objects, and it has remained the name astronomers use ever since.

It was while she was still in graduate school that Stuart Bowyer, one of her professors at the University of California, Berkeley, asked her if she wanted to be involved in a small experiment to siphon off a bit of radiation from a radio telescope as astronomers used it year in and year out and see if there was any hint of an intelligently coded radio message buried in the radio noise. Her engineering and computer programming skills became essential to the project, and soon she was hooked on the search for life elsewhere.

Thus began an illustrious career working full time searching for extraterrestrial civilizations, leading Jill Tarter to receive many awards, including being elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2002, the Adler Planetarium Women in Space Science Award in 2003, and a 2009 TED Prize.

Watch the [TED talk](#) Jill Tarter gave on the fascination of the search for intelligence.

Example 15.4.1: The Drake equation

At the first scientific meeting devoted to SETI, Frank Drake wrote an equation on the blackboard that took the difficult question of estimating the number of civilizations in the Galaxy and broke it down into a series of smaller, more manageable questions. Ever since then, both astronomers and students have used this Drake equation as a means of approaching the most

challenging question: How likely is it that we are alone? Since this is at present an unanswerable question, astronomer Jill Tarter has called the Drake equation a “way of organizing our ignorance.” (See Figure 15.4.4.)

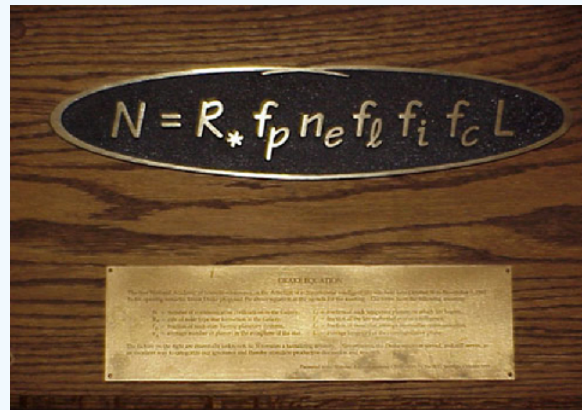


Figure 15.4.4 Drake Equation. A plaque at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory commemorates the conference where the equation was first discussed.

The form of the Drake equation is very simple. To estimate the number of communicating civilizations that currently exist in the Galaxy (we will define these terms more carefully in a moment), we multiply the rate of formation of such civilizations (number per year) by their average lifetime (in years). In symbols,

$$N = R_{\text{total}} \times L$$

To make this formula easier to use (and more interesting), however, Drake separated the rate of formation R_{total} into a series of probabilities:

$$R_{\text{total}} = R_{\text{star}} \times f_p \times f_e \times f_i \times f_c$$

R_{star} is the rate of formation of stars like the Sun in our Galaxy, which is, very roughly, around 10 stars per year. Each of the other terms is a fraction or probability (less than or equal to 1.0), and the product of all these probabilities is itself the total probability that each star will have an intelligent, technological, communicating civilization that we might want to talk to. We have:

- f_p = the fraction of these stars with planets
- f_e = the fraction of the planetary systems that include habitable planets
- f_i = the fraction of habitable planets that actually support life
- f_i = the fraction of inhabited planets that develop advanced intelligence
- f_c = the fraction of these intelligent civilizations that develop science and the technology to build radio telescopes and transmitters

Each of these factors can be discussed and perhaps evaluated, but we must guess at many of the values. In particular, we don't know how to calculate the probability of something that happened once on Earth but has not been observed elsewhere—and these include the development of life, of intelligent life, and of technological life (the last three factors in the equation). One important advance in estimating the terms of the Drake equation comes from the recent discovery of exoplanets. When the Drake equation was first written, no one had any idea whether planets and planetary systems were common. Now we know they are—another example of the Copernican principle.

Even if we don't know the answers, we can make some guesses and calculate the resulting number N . Let's start with the optimism implicit in the Copernican principle and set the last three terms equal to 1.0. If R is 10 stars/year and if we measure the average lifetime of a technological civilization in years, the units of years cancel. If we also assume that f_p is 0.1, and f_e is 1.0, the equation becomes

$$N = R_{\text{total}} \times L = L$$

Now we see the importance of the term L , the lifetime of a communicating civilization (measured in years). We have had this capability (to communicate at the distances of the stars) for only a few decades.

Exercise 15.4.1

Suppose we assume that this stage in our history lasts only one century.

With our optimistic assumptions about the other factors, $\langle L \rangle = 100$ years and $\langle N \rangle = 100$ such civilizations in the entire Galaxy. In that case, there are so few other civilizations like ours that we are unlikely to detect any signals in a SETI search. But suppose the average lifetime is a million years; in that case, there are a million such civilizations in the Galaxy, and some of them may be within range for radio communication.

The most important conclusion from this calculation is that even if we are extremely optimistic about the probabilities, the only way we can expect success from SETI is if other civilizations are much older (and hence probably much more advanced) than ours.

Read [Frank Drake's own account](#) of how he came up with his “equation.” And here is a [recent interview](#) with Frank Drake by one of the authors of this textbook.

SETI outside the Radio Realm

For the reasons discussed above, most SETI programs search for signals at radio wavelengths. But in science, if there are other approaches to answering an unsolved question, we don't want to neglect them. So astronomers have been thinking about other ways we could pick up evidence for the existence of technologically advanced civilizations.

Recently, technology has allowed astronomers to expand the search into the domain of visible light. You might think that it would be hopeless to try to detect a flash of visible light from a planet given the brilliance of the star it orbits. This is why we usually cannot measure the reflected light of planets around other stars. The feeble light of the planet is simply swamped by the “big light” in the neighborhood. So another civilization would need a mighty strong beacon to compete with their star.

However, in recent years, human engineers have learned how to make flashes of light brighter than the Sun. The trick is to “turn on” the light for a very brief time, so that the costs are manageable. But ultra-bright, ultra-short laser pulses (operating for periods of a billionth of a second) can pack a lot of energy and can be coded to carry a message. We also have the technology to detect such short pulses—not with human senses, but with special detectors that can be “tuned” to hunt automatically for such short bursts of light from nearby stars.

Why would any civilization try to outshine its own star in this way? It turns out that the cost of sending an ultra-short laser pulse in the direction of a few promising stars can be less than the cost of sweeping a continuous radio message across the whole sky. Or perhaps they, too, have a special fondness for light messages because one of their senses evolved using light. Several programs are now experimenting with “optical SETI” searches, which can be done with only a modest telescope. (The term *optical* here means using visible light.)

If we let our imaginations expand, we might think of other possibilities. What if a truly advanced civilization should decide to (or need to) renovate its planetary system to maximize the area for life? It could do so by breaking apart some planets or moons and building a ring of solid material that surrounds or encloses the star and intercepts some or all of its light. This huge artificial ring or sphere might glow very brightly at infrared wavelengths, as the starlight it receives is eventually converted to heat and re-radiated into space. That infrared radiation could be detected by our instruments, and searches for such infrared sources are also underway (Figure 15.4.5).

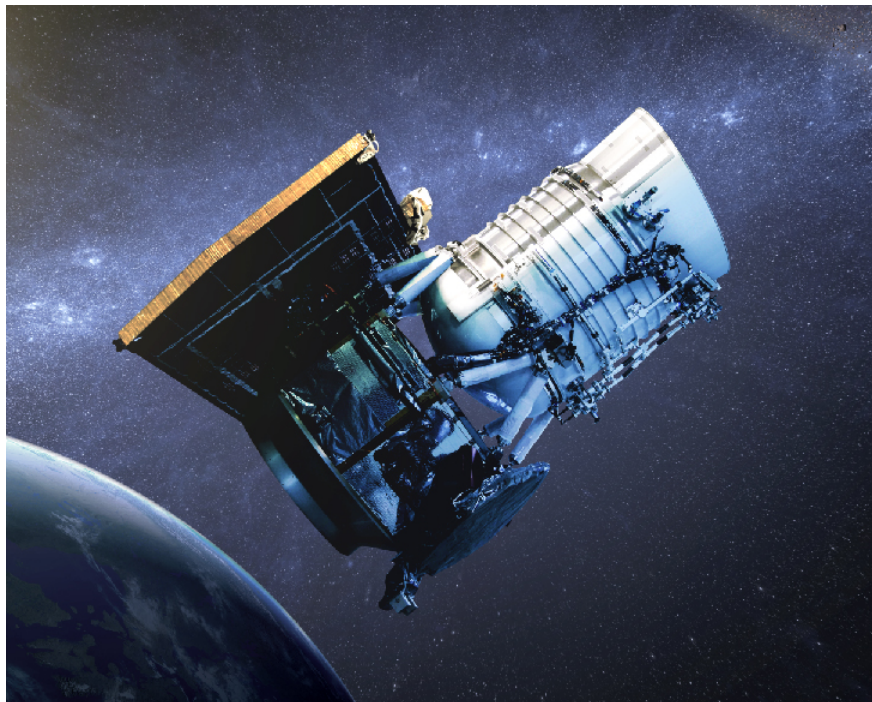


Figure 15.4.5 Wide-Field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE). Astronomers have used this infrared satellite to search for infrared signatures of enormous construction projects by very advanced civilizations, but their first survey did not reveal any.

Should We Transmit in Addition to Listening?

Our planet has some leakage of radio waves into space, from FM radio, television, military radars, and communication between Earth and our orbiting spacecraft. However, such leakage radiation is still quite weak, and therefore difficult to detect at the distances of the stars, at least with the radio technology we have. So at the present time our attempts to communicate with other civilizations that may be out there mostly involve trying to receive messages, but not sending any ourselves.

Some scientists, however, think that it is inconsistent to search for beacons from other civilizations without announcing our presence in a similar way. (We discussed earlier the problem that if every other civilization confined itself to listening, no one would ever get in touch.) So, should we be making regular attempts at sending easily decoded messages into space? Some scientists warn that our civilization is too immature and defenseless to announce ourselves at this early point in our development. The decision whether to transmit or not turns out to be an interesting reflection of how we feel about ourselves and our place in the universe.

Discussions of transmission raise the question of who should speak for planet Earth. Today, anyone and everyone can broadcast radio signals, and many businesses, religious groups, and governments do. It would be a modest step for the same organizations to use or build large radio telescopes and begin intentional transmissions that are much stronger than the signals that leak from Earth today. And if we intercept a signal from an alien civilization, then the issue arises whether to reply.

Who should make the decision about whether, when, and how humanity announces itself to the cosmos? Is there freedom of speech when it comes to sending radio messages to other civilizations? Do all the nations of Earth have to agree before we send a signal strong enough that it has a serious chance of being received at the distances of the stars? How our species reaches a decision about these kinds of questions may well be a test of whether or not there is intelligent life on Earth.

Conclusion

Whether or not we ultimately turn out to be the only intelligent species in our part of the Galaxy, our exploration of the cosmos will surely continue. An important part of that exploration will still be the search for biomarkers from inhabited planets that have not produced technological creatures that send out radio signals. After all, creatures like butterflies and dolphins may never build radio antennas, but we are happy to share our planet with them and would be delighted to find their counterparts on other worlds.

Whether or not life exists elsewhere is just one of the unsolved problems in astronomy that we have discussed in this book. A humble acknowledgment of how much we have left to learn about the universe is one of the fundamental hallmarks of science. This

should not, however, prevent us from feeling exhilarated about how much we have already managed to discover, and feeling curious about what else we might find out in the years to come.

Our progress report on the ideas of astronomy ends here, but we hope that your interest in the universe does not. We hope you will keep up with developments in astronomy through media and online, or by going to an occasional public lecture by a local scientist. Who, after all, can even guess all the amazing things that future research projects will reveal about both the universe and our connection with it?

Summary

Some astronomers are engaged in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). Because other planetary systems are so far away, traveling to the stars is either very slow or extremely expensive (in terms of energy required). Despite many UFO reports and tremendous media publicity, there is no evidence that any of these are related to extraterrestrial visits. Scientists have determined that the best way to communicate with any intelligent civilizations out there is by using electromagnetic waves, and radio waves seem best suited to the task. So far, they have only begun to comb the many different possible stars, frequencies, signal types, and other factors that make up what we call the cosmic haystack problem. Some astronomers are also undertaking searches for brief, bright pulses of visible light and infrared signatures of huge construction projects by advanced civilizations. If we do find a signal someday, deciding whether to answer and what to answer may be two of the greatest challenges humanity will face.

Glossary

Drake equation

a formula for estimating the number of intelligent, technological civilizations in our Galaxy, first suggested by Frank Drake

SETI

the search for extraterrestrial intelligence; usually applied to searches for radio signals from other civilizations

Contributors and Attributions

- Andrew Fraknoi (Foothill College), David Morrison (NASA Ames Research Center), Sidney C. Wolff (National Optical Astronomy Observatory) with many contributing authors. Textbook content produced by OpenStax College is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license. Download for free at <https://openstax.org/details/books/astronomy>.

This page titled [15.4: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [OpenStax](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- [30.4: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence](#) by [OpenStax](#) is licensed [CC BY 4.0](#). Original source: <https://openstax.org/details/books/astronomy>.