

11.1: Introduction

Our view of objects in the sky at night, the warm radiance of sunshine, the sting of sunburn, our cell phone conversations, and the X-rays revealing a broken bone—all are brought to us by electromagnetic waves. It would be hard to overstate the practical importance of electromagnetic waves, through their role in vision, through countless technological applications, and through their ability to transport the energy from the Sun through space to sustain life and almost all of its activities on Earth.



Figure 11.1.16: The pressure from sunlight predicted by Maxwell's equations helped produce the tail of Comet McNaught. (credit: modification of work by Sebastian Deiries—ESO)

Theory predicted the general phenomenon of electromagnetic waves before anyone realized that light is a form of an electromagnetic wave. In the mid-nineteenth century, James Clerk Maxwell formulated a single theory combining all the electric and magnetic effects known at that time. Maxwell's equations, summarizing this theory, predicted the existence of electromagnetic waves that travel at the speed of light. His theory also predicted how these waves behave, and how they carry both energy and momentum. The tails of comets, such as Comet McNaught in Figure 16.1, provide a spectacular example. Energy carried by light from the Sun warms the comet to release dust and gas. The momentum carried by the light exerts a weak force that shapes the dust into a tail of the kind seen here. The flux of particles emitted by the Sun, called the solar wind, typically produces an additional, second tail, as described in detail in this chapter.

In this chapter, we explain Maxwell's theory and show how it leads to his prediction of electromagnetic waves. We use his theory to examine what electromagnetic waves are, how they are produced, and how they transport energy and momentum. We conclude by summarizing some of the many practical applications of electromagnetic waves.

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