

Plans for alien contact found wanting

Governments lack frameworks to respond to discoveries.

Lucas Laursen

Enormous satellite dishes make up the search party for extraterrestrial life, but in the event of success, should a welcome party follow? Astronomers and biologists involved in the search for life on other planets are worried about a lack of regulatory and ethical policies to guide them.

"No government has plans" for what to do in the event of the discovery of intelligent extraterrestrial life, says astrophysicist Martin Dominik of the University of St Andrews, UK, who organized a conference at the Royal Society in London that began today.

For now, the only real framework for responding to the discovery of extraterrestrial life is in a document drafted by researchers involved in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). It advises careful confirmation of the result, a prompt international announcement and refraining from responding immediately, says SETI founder Frank Drake of the SETI Institute in Mountain View, California.

Dominik says the United Nations should have a similar policy in place. "It's too important for any one country," says Dominik, who hopes the two-day conference will stimulate the interest of policy makers.

Palaeobiologist Simon Conway Morris of Cambridge University, UK, warned of the possible consequences of detecting extraterrestrial life. He cited examples of convergent evolution in the Earth's biological history as evidence that there are a limited number of solutions to sensory and social organizational problems. Alien senses could be similar to human senses, he told participants, and social life elsewhere could be as violent as on Earth, where leaf-cutter ants pillage and plunder, and humans wage war. "If the phone rings," he says, "don't pick it up."

The simple life

Some researchers say there are important policy implications even for the discovery of less complicated life, such as microbes within the Solar System. "While microorganisms on Earth get very low moral regard ... on Mars such microbes would be in a different category because they would be the only representatives of life on Mars," says astrobiologist Christopher McKay, of the NASA Ames Research Center in Moffett Field, California.



The Allen Telescope Array searches for alien radio signals. *Seth Shostak / SETI*

Nobody has decided whether it would be acceptable to commercialize microbes found in the Solar System, or to what extent they should be protected. McKay says that NASA abides by rules set by the international Committee on Space Research regarding environmental contamination during the exploration of other moons and planets. An upcoming workshop will continue the discussion of space bioethics, he adds.

Researchers want to avoid the conflict and confusion which surrounded the 1996 ADVERTISEMENT claim that a meteorite from Mars, ALH 84001, contained potential evidence of primitive life.¹ Astrophysicist Jocelyn Bell Burnell, of the University of Oxford, UK, notes that a poorly handled scientific announcement of this scale would have massive consequences for the reputations and funding of researchers.

There is no UK government policy on the detection or ethics of extraterrestrial life just yet, but the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) did send a representative to today's meeting. "It's over the horizon for us," says POST adviser Sarah Bunn.

References

1. McKay, D. S. *et al. Science* **272**, 924 (1996). | [Article](#)

Comments

If you find something abusive or inappropriate or which does not otherwise comply with our [Terms](#) or [Community Guidelines](#), please select the relevant 'Report this comment' link.

Comments on this thread are vetted after posting.

#9362

I have to say that I don't believe it would EVER make economic sense for aliens to come and pillage our planet. However, I find myself agreeing that it's better to keep quiet, until we know more.

[Report this comment](#)

Posted by: **Luca Fenu** | 2010-01-26 10:43:44 AM

#9363

Honestly, if ET calls my first thought is not going to be "Why doesn't someone tell me what I need to say?" This is not something that requires consensus, it is something that will depend on an individual's enlightenment. We have to trust "Johnny on the spot" to do the right thing and, in my view, the right thing will not be to hand off the event to a committee. Such is the privilege of discovery.

[Report this comment](#)

Posted by: **Steven Ericsson-Zenith** | 2010-01-26 10:49:21 AM

#9364

Even a benevolent alien species could inadvertently do us harm. Certainly contact here between our developed and underdeveloped societies frequently leads to disaster. And of course we could easily do the same to a less developed alien society. Any contacts would have to be channeled very carefully.

Famous last words, I suppose... We'll probably muck it up dreadfully.

[Report this comment](#)

Posted by: **Robert Gertz** | 2010-01-26 10:49:31 AM

#9365

This is all much ado about nothing. It takes time (= money) to work up these sorts of policies. It makes little or no sense to waste it on this since there is not the least shred of empirical evidence that any extraterrestrial intelligence exists. There is no evidence that any extraterrestrial **life** even exists.

[Report this comment](#)

Posted by: **Gene Godbold** | 2010-01-26 12:51:11 PM

Add your own comment

This is a public forum. Please keep to our [Community Guidelines](#). You can be controversial, but please don't get personal or offensive and do keep it brief. Remember our threads are for feedback and discussion - not for publishing papers, press releases or advertisements.

You need to be registered with Nature to leave a comment. Please [log in](#) or [register](#) as a new user. You will be re-directed back to this page.

[Log in / register](#)

Nature ISSN 0028-0836 EISSN 1476-4687

[About NPG](#)
[Contact NPG](#)
[RSS web feeds](#)
[Help](#)

[Privacy policy](#)
[Legal notice](#)
[Accessibility statement](#)
[Nature News](#)
[Naturejobs](#)
[Nature Asia](#)
[Nature Education](#)

©
2010
Nature

Publishing
Group, a
division of
Macmillan
Publishers
Limited. All

[About Nature News](#)
[Nature News Sitemap](#)

Rights Reserved.
partner of AGORA,
HINARI, OARE, INASP,
CrossRef and COUNTER

Search: