

Let's try to contact planets, Sagan proposes



Carl Sagan: Contacting other beings may offer some positive reasons to think this planet will survive.

By Val Sears Toronto Star

If anyone is listening out there in the cosmos, the first indication of intelligent life on earth they may receive is Jackie Gleason bellowing in *The Honeymooners*.

It's a dreary prospect, admits Dr. Carl Sagan, Pulitzer Prize winning scientist, but with formal attempts to contact other beings in our galaxy at a standstill, television signals may be the first communication to reach them.

Sagan, whose television series *Cosmos* is one of the most successful public television programs in history, is in Toronto to deliver two of the H. L. Welsh lectures on physics at the University of Toronto.

And while his approach to the possibility of complex organic forms — or indeed life — in outer space is engagingly informal, he regards the goal as deadly serious.

"If after a 20 or 30-year search by radiotelescope we found nothing," he told

a press conference yesterday, "it may suggest that civilizations tend to destroy themselves upon reaching a certain state of technical adolescence.

"This would have obvious and sobering implications for those of us on earth in the nuclear age.

"On the other hand, if we did make contact, it would not only end our planetary provincialism, it would offer some positive reasons to think we could survive."

Enormous results

Sagan, director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies at Cornell University, has been pleading the case for a Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence as a cheap, technologically simple program that might yield enormous rewards.

"A reasonable search, covering perhaps 10 million stars, would cost only about \$10 million a year," he said.

Search programs, which began with Project Ozma in the United States in 1960, have been terminated by budget restrictions.

Now, Sagan told a large lecture audience at the university last night, it appears that further budget cuts may force the U.S. to close its operating planetary probes and thus end their usefulness forever.

Voyager and Viking probes to Mars, Jupiter and Saturn have uncovered incredible things, he said: Vast underground sulphur oceans on one planetary moon, an organic atmosphere on another.

On Titan, a moon of Saturn, beneath the red clouds is a 100-metre deep layer of solid organic matter, resting on ice and topped by a methane sea.

In a public lecture tonight in Convocation Hall, Sagan will describe the search for extraterrestrial intelligence.