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Mission set to search for life in space

REPORTS of a huge flying saucer over Alaska not long ago underlines a space age paradox within the scientific community.

Many scientists are sceptical about supposed sightings of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), but many of these same scholars believe the galaxy is teeming with intelligent life and support projects for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, dubbed SETI.

Scientists with the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) have embarked on an official mission to vastly expand the scope of the search.

The Alaska incident was reported last November by Japan Air Lines pilot Kenji Terauchi, who said his plane was trailed for an hour by a walnut-shaped craft twice as big as an aircraft carrier, with a broad brim at its centre and bright running lights.

He said the UFO stayed with him as he dropped to 4,000 feet and circled, and that his plane's weather ra-

dar picked it up. The Federal Aviation Administration initially reported that it, too, had detected a craft on radar, but later said a malfunction may have created a duplicate radar image of the cargo plane itself.

The Alaska incident was widely dismissed by space experts as just another inconclusive episode.

Thousands of people, including former President Jimmy Carter, have reported seeing UFOs.

That has not shaken the scepticism among scientists like University of Virginia physicist James Trefil, who

says "there has never been an unambiguous case" in all these sightings.

Even so, Mr Trefil told a recent conference at Washington's Smithsonian Institution, the conventional wisdom among scientists also holds that "we are not alone."

Given the millions of stars in the Milky Way, the probability that many of them have planets with environments suitable to life, and the billions of years in which civilisations could have evolved, these scientists say it is likely the galaxy has many advanced civilisations.