

UFOs and extra-terrestrial research: a paradox for scientists

Seeking signals of life in space

From CHRISTOPHER HANSON,
in Washington

REPORTS of a huge flying saucer over Alaska not long ago have pointed up a space-age paradox within the scientific community. Many scientists are very 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 extra-terrestrial intelligence (SETI).

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

The Alaska incident was reported last November by Japan Air Lines (JAL) 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 descended 1,200m and circled, and that his

descended 1,200m and circled, and that his plane's weather radar picked it up.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) initially reported that it, too, had detected a craft on radar, but later said a malfunction might 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 US President Jimmy Carter have reported seeing UFOs. That has not shaken the scepticism among scientists such as University of Virginia physicist James Trefil, who says "there has never been an unambiguous case" in all these sightings.

Even so, Dr Trefil told a recent conference at Washington's Smithsonian Institution, the conventional wisdom among scientists also held 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. Their estimates of how many range from one million to fewer than 100.

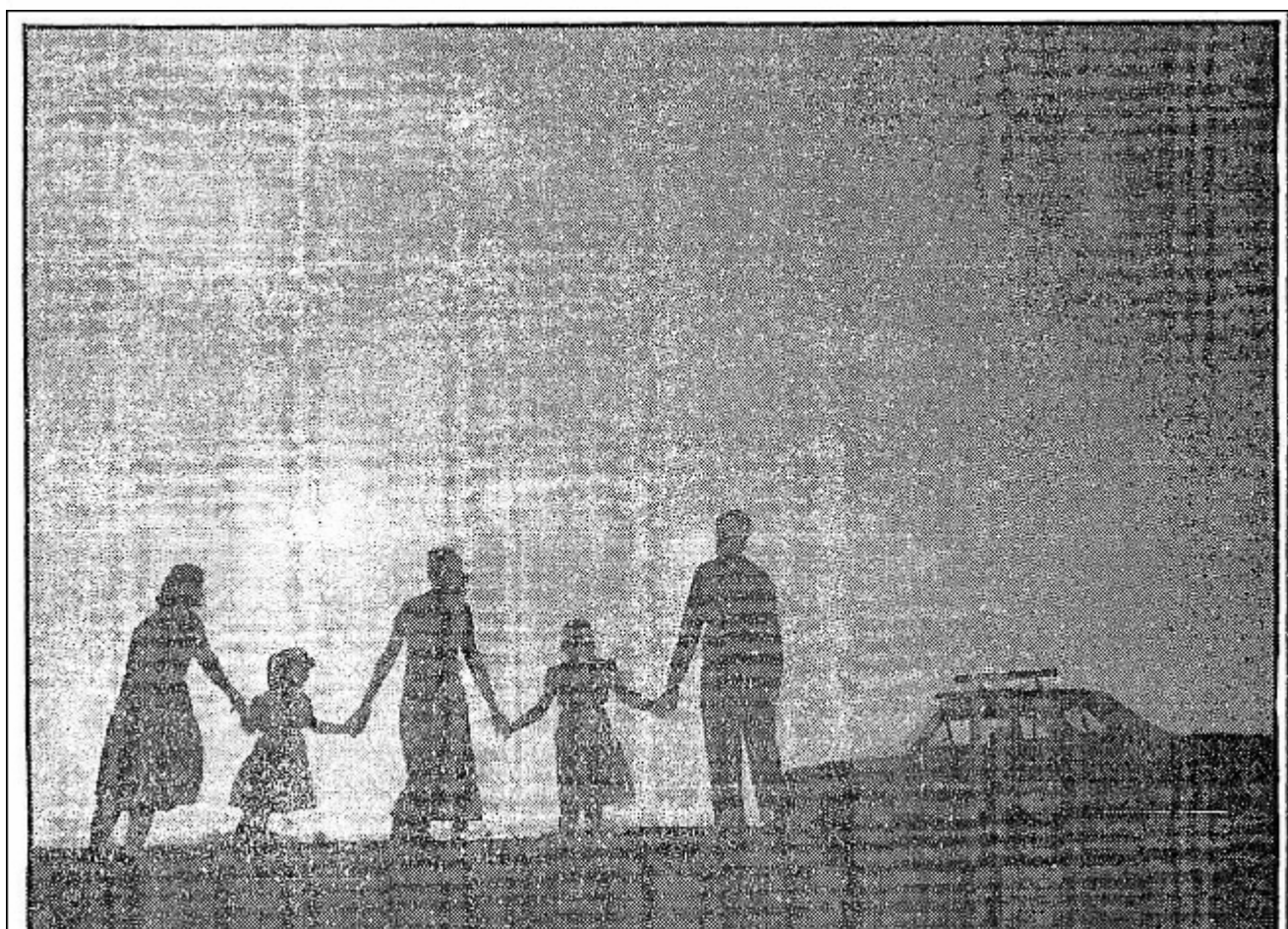
The operating theory behind SETI is that if advanced alien civilisations exist, they may be trying to communicate with other worlds by beaming radio signals into space — and radiotelescopes on earth could pick up such signals.


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US scientists pioneered SETI, starting in 1960 with physicist Frank Drake's Ozma project, named for a *Wizard of Oz* character and using a radiotelescope in West Virginia. Now the Soviet Union, France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Japan and Canada are funding SETI radiotelescope projects.

No alien signals have yet been detected, scientists say.

But NASA, with an annual SETI budget of some \$US2 million (about \$A3 million), is developing the technology for a vast expansion in the number of frequencies that could be scanned for messages — a jump from thousands of frequencies to many millions. NASA plans to scan the entire sky and conduct closer probes of 800 stars which are similar to the sun, beginning in the 1990s.





This British family looks towards the sky where they say they not only saw a saucer but were questioned by extra-terrestrial beings.

"In one minute [with the new technology] we will accomplish more than has been carried out in the past 25 years with all previous programs," NASA scientist Peter Backus said.

He said that NASA's search would be "tens of billions" of times more thorough than today's most advanced SETI probes.

Earthlings have sent out relatively few messages to possible aliens, although scientists say advanced civilisations could tell earth was inhabited from military radar and television rays leaking into space.

Scientists beamed an electronic greeting into space using a radiotelescope in Puerto Rico in 1974.

NASA's unmanned Pioneer 10 spacecraft carried a plaque with drawings of a nude man and woman and a space map showing the earth's location, and Voyager 1 carried a disc with rock music including a Chuck Berry

song, a message of friendship from then-UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, and samples of 60 languages.

Some scientists say receipt of an alien message would be the most important event in human history and could result in mankind learning vast amounts from a more advanced culture.

But University of Virginia physicist Robert Rood sounded a note of warning in his book, *Are We Alone?* "The civilisation that blurts out its existence on interstellar beacons at the first opportunity may be like some

at the first opportunity may be like some early hominoid descending from the trees and calling, 'here, kitty' to a sabre-toothed tiger," Dr Rood wrote.

Some scientists, including Dr Trefil, are sceptical about the possibility of intelligent alien civilisations. "Where are they?" Dr Trefil asked. "If a single civilisation could colonise the galaxy in millions of years, and if billions of years have elapsed since the first

such civilisation was supposed to arise, how can we explain the total lack of evidence for [extraterrestrials] on earth?"

One theory is the alien civilisations chose to put our solar system off limits as a kind of galactic zoo or nature reserve. But Dr Trefil discounts this: "What is the probability ... that of all the billions of individuals in each of the millions of galactic races, there is not a single poacher?"

Some say it is possible an alien civilisation is only now expanding into the galaxy and had not reached earth. But Dr Trefil says that would be remarkable given that the history of man was "a blink of the eye on any galactic time scale".

But he supports SETI research, which could lead scientists to conclude that man is alone in the universe after all. He said such a conclusion would be highly significant. It would mean that "we are special".

— Reuters