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## SETI: Is the truth really out there?

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FLORIDA TODAY Space Online

For August 11, 1997

Is the truth really out there?

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. (AP) -- Is the truth really out there? A handful of scientists listening intently for faint radio signals from distant solar systems are keeping their ears, and minds, open to that possibility.

Like their Hollywood counterparts in the movie "Contact," scientists at the SETI Institute hunt for life in space using powerful radio telescopes.

SETI, short for Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, is surveying 1,000 stars similar to our sun but light years distant. They hope that the survey, called Project Phoenix, will help answer a question as old as mankind: Are we alone?

"This is a question 100,000 civilizations have asked. We are the first civilization which could hope to answer that," said Seth Shostak, a scientist and spokesman for SETI. "It would be a shame not to try."

At their offices 35 miles south of San Francisco, SETI scientists listen for signals between 1,000 and 3,000 megahertz on the radio dial, where natural background static is at a minimum. After weeding out earthly and satellite signals, they have been left so far with no messages from space. But they persevere.

SETI had its efforts cut short four years ago, when Congress trimmed

its funding and booted them out of their offices at the NASA's Ames Research Center nearby.

At the time, Sen. Richard Bryan, D-Nev., called SETI "The Great Martian Chase" and added, "I think this money could better be left unspent."

Donors such as Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and Intel co-founder Gordon Moore stepped in and rescued SETI, which now receives its estimated \$4 million annual budget through private contributions.

Similar projects have been active since 1960, when radio astronomer Frank Drake conducted Project Ozma, the first radio scan for extraterrestrial life. Ozma didn't find anything, but Drake found his calling.

Now a professor of astronomy and astrophysics at the University of California at Santa Cruz and SETI's president, Drake continues to pursue his lifelong passion.

"It's the last great adventure for humans," Drake said. "It's an adventure which can guide us philosophically as to what we might become. It drives us all."

If SETI does succeed in detecting a signal, standard protocol is that they verify it with another observatory, then notify the International Astronomical Union, Shostak said.

But there remains the hazard that whoever we find may, in turn, find us. And Shostak is not discounting the notion that the aliens may be as surly as recent popular culture portrays.

"I don't think that all the advanced critters of the galaxy are going to be benign. I just can't believe that because there's a big premium that nature is willing to pay for aggression. Aggression pays," Shostak said.

The project still represents an unproven endeavor, and fellow scientists comprise some of SETI's harshest critics. At least one peer says Project Phoenix is a waste of time -- because aliens already are here.

"I think they are and have been here since 1947, implementing their strategy of gradually letting us know," says James Deardorff, who worked for 10 years as a senior scientist with the National Center for Atmospheric Research and for eight years as a professor at Oregon State University.

In 1986, Deardorff published a paper about his alien contact theory in the Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society.

His work, titled "Possible Extraterrestrial Strategy for Earth," claims that inconsistencies with SETI-like searches and the public panic that might ensue if a signal was detected are something aliens would anticipate and avoid.

Deardorff doesn't think aliens want to be found -- yet.

"They would never be able to trust that their message would get to the public as a whole," Deardorff said. He surmises aliens are likely to have a long-term plan to circumvent the scientific and political communities, and to make their presence known through sporadic human abductions and UFO sightings over time.

"A UFO witness would have a better idea of what's going on than Frank Drake would," Deardorff said. "ET wouldn't bother to use 20th-century science."

Another critic of SETI's reasoning is Ben Zuckerman, a professor of physics and astronomy at UCLA. If aliens exist, they wouldn't sit back and send radio waves, they'd be here, Zuckerman maintains.

"We've had life here for billions of years. If they were studying the Earth, anybody with a modicum of curiosity is going to come," Zuckerman said.

"They put all their eggs in one basket," Zuckerman said of SETI's limited search. "For 3 billion years there was life on Earth, it was just not sending out radio waves. They've closed the door to all this kind of life."

SETI scientists are undaunted by such peer criticism. And their

diligent work has spawned similar programs at Ohio State University, the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard.

BETA, or Billion-Channel Extra-Terrestrial Assay, is another radio telescope sky-survey directed by Harvard physics Professor Paul Horowitz, who shares Drake's enthusiasm and dreams of success.

"SETI is bound to succeed sooner or later," Horowitz said. How certain is he that life exists out there?

"Absolutely 100 percent. But you know what they say about astrophysicists," he said. "Often in error, but never in doubt."

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