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### Protection against Martian microbes

From: [Stig\\_Agermose@online.pol.dk](mailto:Stig_Agermose@online.pol.dk) (Stig Agermose)  
Date: Sun, 9 Mar 1997 00:45:42 +0100  
Fwd Date: Mon, 10 Mar 1997 12:44:17 -0500  
Subject: Protection against Martian microbes

After Dolly, Martian microbes?

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(Mar 8, 1997 01:02 a.m. EST) - Now that you're getting used to the idea of cloned sheep, it's time for a new worry: Martian microbes.

In the next decade or so, a NASA space probe may transport Martian rocks to Earth. The rocks might contain alien microbes, a National Research Council panel said Thursday.

While "it is doubtful that (the microbes) could adapt to Earth's environment or cause significant harm, the risk is not zero," the council warned.

So as part of a "planetary protection policy," the council urges NASA to be prepared, if necessary, to:

-- Sterilize a returning robot probe, perhaps in space, before it returns to Earth.

-- Or leave the probe in space where alien microbes wouldn't hurt anyone.

Rock samples "should be isolated physically and biologically and regarded as hazardous until proved otherwise," says a council summary of the report, written by 12 scientists.

The council is the research arm of the National Academy of Sciences, the nation's most distinguished scientific organization. In a sense, the academy is the Supreme Court of science: It advises the federal government on scientific issues, and its counsel often sways national policy on technical topics.

In August, a scientific team from NASA, Stanford and elsewhere reported stunning news: A meteorite contained evidence of life on Mars.

The rock, found in Antarctica, apparently was hurled there by an asteroid impact on Mars millions of years ago. The rock contains hot-dog-shaped objects that may be fossilized Martian microbes.

If the prehistoric fossils are real, then microbes may still inhabit Mars -- perhaps in volcano-heated hot springs or subsurface groundwater.

Starting last autumn, NASA and Russia began a decade-long effort to launch robot space probes to Mars. The agency is considering whether to ask Congress to fund a "sample return" mission, in which a robot would

collect Mars rocks and return them to Earth.

A NASA robot might unearth them early in the next century.

The council's "Task Group on Issues in Sample Return" explored a science-fictionish question: Assuming Martian microbes come to Earth, could they be dangerous? And if so, how could humans counter the threat?

The good news is that on Earth, "only a tiny fraction" of known microorganisms are harmful when exposed to other organisms, says the council report, "Mars Sample Return: Issues and Recommendations."

Martian microbes may have trouble surviving on Earth. Its ecosystem is far more complex and crowded with competing organisms than any conceivable ecosystem on Mars, the report says.

History is repeating itself: In the late 1960s, NASA feared that lunar astronauts might accidentally bring lunar microbes back to Earth.

As a precaution, NASA quarantined returning astronauts in a sealed chamber. Via TV, the world watched in anxiety and amusement as President Nixon stood in front of the quarantine chamber and waved through a window at grinning Apollo 11 astronauts.

No Moon microbes were detected.

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