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NASA's Protection Of Earth Against Alien Life

From: wanderer@post8.tele.dk
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Stig

John D. Rummel has a mission: to protect the planet. His job goes beyond the responsibilities we all share to recycle, refrain from littering and repair our cars' emissions systems. Rummel's charter comes from NASA, which has pledged to uphold a United Nations' treaty setting down commandments for space exploration.

As NASA's planetary protection officer, two rules concern Rummel:

- Thou Shalt Not Allow Earth Life to Infect Thy Sister Planets.
- Thou Shalt Not Allow Alien Life to Infect Earth.

He doesn't habitually dress in black, wear Ray-Bans or sashay with a gun to get his job done. His is the painstaking work of a scientist, and his attention is focused on the microscopic.

It Came From Outer Space

Rummel returns to NASA's one-man, part-time Planetary Protection Office after a four-year hiatus. In his earlier tenure, Rummel, and then his successor, laid out plans to scour a troop of robotic explorers before they were dispatched to Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Some of them didn't need much sterilization. Conditions on Venus, for example, are so hellish -- with temperatures of 900 degrees Fahrenheit and an atmosphere 100 times the pressure of Earth's -- that any hitchhiking Earth microbes would be vaporized long before they'd have a chance to "extraterrestrialize."

Going to Mercury or Venus is a Category 1 of the Planetary Protection Program protocols. All that means is that the planet is so hostile you can't screw it up, explains Rummel.

Mars still holds the possibility of harboring life or at least the fossilized remains of ancient microorganisms. So that bumps up the level of concern to a Category 3 for a spacecraft programmed to orbit Mars, and a Category 4 for one descending to the planet's surface.

During his tenure, Rummel will be working to prepare for the highest level of security, Category 5: the stuff from outer space.

Hello, Earth

Over the next five years, NASA plans to launch a trio of missions to bring back samples of our celestial neighborhood.

The Genesis mission, targeted for launch in January 2001, is designed to capture electrically charged particles and other elements spewing from the sun. The research is intended to help refine theories about how the sun and its companion planets were formed.

The Stardust spacecraft will travel more than halfway to Jupiter to visit comet Wild 2 (pronounced "vilt") in December 2004 to gather dust samples from its tail. Stardust also will preserve bits of the interstellar dust collected during its five-year journey to the comet.

Finally, after decades of remote surveys of Mars, researchers hope to have bits of Martian soil and rocks in their laboratories around 2008 to probe for additional signs of organic life.

The last time NASA had to worry about protecting the planet from extraterrestrial microbes was during the early days of the Apollo moon program. Says Rummel, "I think it's great that we live in a country where we can actually envision picking up pieces of another world and bringing them back. But if you're going to do it, you have to do it responsibly."

A task group of the National Research Council is considering the question of what restrictions should be placed on extraterrestrial material and how to classify the returning samples. Lunar substances, for example, are now unrestricted. "There's so much free exchange of material between the Earth and the moon, that we now consider the moon, from a planetary protection viewpoint, to be just like Earth," says Rummel.

For the Mars rocks in particular, Rummel envisions a P-4 level of containment, which is what you'd need if you wanted to study the most dangerous viruses on Earth. More insidious than AIDS. Ghastly life forms, like the Ebola virus.

"We're not expecting anything on Mars to be of that nature," Rummel hastens to add. "It's unlikely that anything on Mars would be harmful." The containment is intended as much to protect the integrity of the scientific samples as it is to stave off a microbiological attack on Earth.

But still, warns Rummel, "We don't have a lot of evidence about what's really out there."

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