

30

Life in the Universe

Figure 30.1 Astrobiology: The Road to Life in the Universe. In this fanciful montage produced by a NASA artist, we see one roadmap for discovering life in the universe. Learning more about the origin, evolution, and properties of life on Earth aids us in searching for evidence of life beyond our planet. Our neighbor world, Mars, had warmer, wetter conditions billions of years ago that might have helped life there begin. Farther out, Jupiter's moon Europa represents the icy moons of the outer solar system. Beneath their shells of solid ice may lie vast oceans of liquid water that could support biology. Beyond our solar system are stars that host their own planets, some of which might be similar to Earth in the ability to support liquid water—and a thriving biosphere—at the planet's surface. Research is pushing actively in all these directions with the goal of proving a scientific answer to the question, "Are we alone?" (credit: modification of work by NASA)

Chapter Outline

- 30.1 The Cosmic Context for Life
- 30.2 Astrobiology
- 30.3 Searching for Life beyond Earth
- 30.4 The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence



Thinking Ahead

As we have learned more about the universe, we have naturally wondered whether there might be other forms of life out there. The ancient question, "Are we alone in the universe?" connects us to generations of humans before us. While in the past, this question was in the realm of philosophy or science fiction, today we have the means to seek an answer through scientific inquiry. In this chapter, we will consider how life began on Earth, whether the same processes could have led to life on other worlds, and how we might seek evidence of life elsewhere. This is the science of astrobiology.

The search for life on other planets is not the same as the search for *intelligent* life, which (if it exists) is surely much rarer. Learning more about the origin, evolution, and properties of life on Earth aids us in searching for evidence of all kinds of life beyond that on our planet.

30.1 The Cosmic Context for Life

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the chemical and environmental conditions that make Earth hospitable to life
- Discuss the assumption underlying the Copernican principle and outline its implications for modern-day astronomers
- Understand the questions underlying the Fermi paradox

We saw that the universe was born in the Big Bang about 14 billion years ago. After the initial hot, dense fireball of creation cooled sufficiently for atoms to exist, all matter consisted of hydrogen and helium (with a very small amount of lithium). As the universe aged, processes within stars created the other elements, including those that make up Earth (such as iron, silicon, magnesium, and oxygen) and those required for life as we know it, such as carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen. These and other elements combined in space to produce a wide variety of compounds that form the basis of life on Earth. In particular, life on Earth is based on the presence of a key unit known as an **organic molecule**, a molecule that contains carbon. Especially important are the hydrocarbons, chemical compounds made up entirely of hydrogen and carbon, which serve as the basis for our biological chemistry, or *biochemistry*. While we do not understand the details of how life on Earth began, it is clear that to make creatures like us possible, events like the ones we described must have occurred, resulting in what is called the *chemical evolution* of the universe.

What Made Earth Hospitable to Life?

About 5 billion years ago, a cloud of gas and dust in this cosmic neighborhood began to collapse under its own weight. Out of this cloud formed the Sun and its planets, together with all the smaller bodies, such as comets, that also orbit the Sun ([Figure 30.2](#)). The third planet from the Sun, as it cooled, eventually allowed the formation of large quantities of liquid water on its surface.



Figure 30.2 Comet Hyakutake. This image was captured in 1996 by NASA photographer Bill Ingalls. Comet impacts can deliver both water and a variety of interesting chemicals, including some organic chemicals, to Earth. (credit: NASA/Bill Ingalls)

The chemical variety and moderate conditions on Earth eventually led to the formation of molecules that could make copies of themselves (reproduce), which is essential for beginning life. Over the billions of years of Earth history, life evolved and became more complex. The course of evolution was punctuated by occasional planet-wide changes caused by collisions with some of the smaller bodies that did not make it into the Sun or one of its accompanying worlds. As we saw in the chapter on [Earth as a Planet](#), mammals may owe their domination of Earth's surface to just such a collision 65 million years ago, which led to the extinction of the dinosaurs (along with the majority of other living things). The details of such mass extinctions are currently the focus of a great deal of scientific interest.

Through many twisting turns, the course of evolution on Earth produced a creature with self-consciousness,

able to ask questions about its own origins and place in the cosmos (Figure 30.3). Like most of Earth, this creature is composed of atoms that were forged in earlier generations of stars—in this case, assembled into both its body and brain. We might say that through the thoughts of human beings, the matter in the universe can become aware of itself.



Figure 30.3 Young Human. Human beings have the intellect to wonder about their planet and what lies beyond it. Through them (and perhaps other intelligent life), the universe becomes aware of itself. (credit: Andrew Fraknoi)

Think about those atoms in your body for a minute. They are merely on loan to you from the lending library of atoms that make up our local corner of the universe. Atoms of many kinds circulate through your body and then leave it—with each breath you inhale and exhale and the food you eat and excrete. Even the atoms that take up more permanent residence in your tissues will not be part of you much longer than you are alive. Ultimately, you will return your atoms to the vast reservoir of Earth, where they will be incorporated into other structures and even other living things in the millennia to come.

This picture of *cosmic evolution*, of our descent from the stars, has been obtained through the efforts of scientists in many fields over many decades. Some of its details are still tentative and incomplete, but we feel reasonably confident in its broad outlines. It is remarkable how much we have been able to learn in the short time we have had the instruments to probe the physical nature of the universe.

The Copernican Principle

Our study of astronomy has taught us that we have always been wrong in the past whenever we have claimed that Earth is somehow unique. Galileo, using the newly invented technology of the telescope, showed us that Earth is not the center of the solar system, but merely one of a number of objects orbiting the Sun. Our study of the stars has demonstrated that the Sun itself is a rather undistinguished star, halfway through its long main-sequence stage like so many billions of others. There seems nothing special about our position in the Milky Way Galaxy either, and nothing surprising about our Galaxy's position in either its own group or its supercluster.

The discovery of planets around other stars confirms our idea that the formation of planets is a natural consequence of the formation of stars. We have identified thousands of exoplanets—planets orbiting around other stars, from huge ones orbiting close to their stars (informally called “hot Jupiters”) down to planets smaller than Earth. A steady stream of exoplanet discoveries is leading to the conclusion that earthlike planets occur frequently—enough that there are likely many billions of “exo-Earths” in our own Milky Way Galaxy alone. From a planetary perspective, Earth-size planets are not unusual.

Philosophers of science sometimes call the idea that there is nothing special about our place in the universe the *Copernican principle*. Given all of the above, most scientists would be surprised if life were limited to our planet and had started nowhere else. There are billions of stars in our Galaxy old enough for life to have developed on a planet around them, and there are billions of other galaxies as well. Astronomers and

biologists have long conjectured that a series of events similar to those on the early Earth probably led to living organisms on many planets around other stars, and possibly even on other planets in our solar system, such as Mars.

The real scientific issue (which we do not currently know the answer to) is whether organic biochemistry is likely or unlikely in the universe at large. Are we a fortunate and exceedingly rare outcome of chemical evolution, or is organic biochemistry a regular part of the chemical evolution of the cosmos? We do not yet know the answer to this question, but data, even an exceedingly small amount (like finding “unrelated to us” living systems on a world like Europa), will help us arrive at it.

So Where Are They?

If the Copernican principle is applied to life, then biology may be rather common among planets. Taken to its logical limit, the Copernican principle also suggests that intelligent life like us might be common. Intelligence like ours has some very special properties, including an ability to make progress through the application of technology. Organic life around other (older) stars may have started a billion years earlier than we did on Earth, so they may have had a lot more time to develop advanced technology such as sending information, probes, or even life-forms between stars.

Faced with such a prospect, physicist Enrico Fermi asked a question several decades ago that is now called the *Fermi paradox*: where are they? If life and intelligence are common and have such tremendous capacity for growth, why is there not a network of galactic civilizations whose presence extends even into a “latecomer” planetary system like ours?

Several solutions have been suggested to the Fermi paradox. Perhaps life is common but intelligence (or at least technological civilization) is rare. Perhaps such a network will come about in the future but has not yet had the time to develop. Maybe there are invisible streams of data flowing past us all the time that we are not advanced enough or sensitive enough to detect. Maybe advanced species make it a practice not to interfere with immature, developing consciousness such as our own. Or perhaps civilizations that reach a certain level of technology then self-destruct, meaning there are no other civilizations now existing in our Galaxy. We do not yet know whether any advanced life is out there and, if it is, why we are not aware of it. Still, you might want to keep these issues in mind as you read the rest of this chapter.

LINK TO LEARNING



Is there a network of galactic civilizations beyond our solar system? If so, why can't we see them? Explore the possibilities in the [cartoon video \(https://openstax.org/l/30fermparadox\)](https://openstax.org/l/30fermparadox) “The Fermi Paradox—Where Are All the Aliens?”

30.2 Astrobiology

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- › Describe the chemical building blocks required for life
- › Describe the molecular systems and processes driving the origin and evolution of life
- › Describe the characteristics of a habitable environment
- › Describe some of the extreme conditions on Earth, and explain how certain organisms have adapted to these conditions

Scientists today take a multidisciplinary approach to studying the origin, evolution, distribution, and ultimate fate of life in the universe; this field of study is known as **astrobiology**. You may also sometimes hear this field

referred to as *exobiology* or *bioastronomy*. Astrobiology brings together astronomers, planetary scientists, chemists, geologists, and biologists (among others) to work on the same problems from their various perspectives.

Among the issues that astrobiologists explore are the conditions in which life arose on Earth and the reasons for the extraordinary adaptability of life on our planet. They are also involved in identifying habitable worlds beyond Earth and in trying to understand in practical terms how to look for life on those worlds. Let's look at some of these issues in more detail.

The Building Blocks of Life

While no unambiguous evidence for life has yet been found anywhere beyond Earth, life's chemical building blocks have been detected in a wide range of extraterrestrial environments. Meteorites (which you learned about in [Cosmic Samples and the Origin of the Solar System](#)) have been found to contain two kinds of substances whose chemical structures mark them as having an extraterrestrial origin—amino acids and sugars. **Amino acids** are **organic compounds** that are the molecular building blocks of proteins. **Proteins** are key biological molecules that provide the structure and function of the body's tissues and organs and essentially carry out the “work” of the cell. When we examine the gas and dust around comets, we also find a number of organic molecules—compounds that on Earth are associated with the chemistry of life.

Expanding beyond our solar system, one of the most interesting results of modern radio astronomy has been the discovery of organic molecules in giant clouds of gas and dust between stars. More than 100 different molecules have been identified in these reservoirs of cosmic raw material, including formaldehyde, alcohol, and others we know as important stepping stones in the development of life on Earth. Using radio telescopes and radio spectrometers, astronomers can measure the abundances of various chemicals in these clouds. We find organic molecules most readily in regions where the interstellar dust is most abundant, and it turns out these are precisely the regions where star formation (and probably planet formation) happen most easily ([Figure 30.4](#)).



Figure 30.4 Cloud of Gas and Dust. This cloud of gas and dust in the constellation of Scorpius is the sort of region where complex molecules are found. It is also the sort of cloud where new stars form from the reservoir of gas and dust in the cloud. Radiation from a group of hot stars (off the picture to the bottom left) called the Scorpius OB Association is “eating into” the cloud, sweeping it into an elongated shape and causing the reddish glow seen at its tip. (credit: Dr. Robert Gendler)

Clearly the early Earth itself produced some of the molecular building blocks of life. Since the early 1950s, scientists have tried to duplicate in their laboratories the chemical pathways that led to life on our planet. In a series of experiments known as the *Miller-Urey experiments*, pioneered by Stanley Miller and Harold Urey at

the University of Chicago, biochemists have simulated conditions on early Earth and have been able to produce some of the fundamental building blocks of life, including those that form proteins and other large biological molecules known as nucleic acids (which we will discuss shortly).

Although these experiments produced encouraging results, there are some problems with them. The most interesting chemistry from a biological perspective takes place with hydrogen-rich or *reducing* gases, such as ammonia and methane. However, the early atmosphere of Earth was probably dominated by carbon dioxide (as Venus' and Mars' atmospheres still are today) and may not have contained an abundance of reducing gases comparable to that used in Miller-Urey type experiments. Hydrothermal vents—seafloor systems in which ocean water is superheated and circulated through crustal or mantle rocks before reemerging into the ocean—have also been suggested as potential contributors of organic compounds on the early Earth, and such sources would not require Earth to have an early reducing atmosphere.

Both earthly and extraterrestrial sources may have contributed to Earth's early supply of organic molecules, although we have more direct evidence for the latter. It is even conceivable that life itself originated elsewhere and was seeded onto our planet—although this, of course, does not solve the problem of how that life originated to begin with.

LINK TO LEARNING



Hydrothermal vents are beginning to seem more likely as early contributors to the organic compounds found on Earth. Read about hydrothermal vents and watch videos and slideshows on these and other deep-sea wonders at the [Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution \(https://openstax.org/l/30wohooceins\)](https://openstax.org/l/30wohooceins) website.

Try an interactive simulation of hydrothermal-vent circulation at the [Dive and Discover \(https://openstax.org/l/30divediscover\)](https://openstax.org/l/30divediscover) website.

The Origin and Early Evolution of Life

The carbon compounds that form the chemical basis of life may be common in the universe, but it is still a giant step from these building blocks to a living cell. Even the simplest molecules of the **genes** (the basic functional units that carry the genetic, or hereditary, material in a cell) contain millions of molecular units, each arranged in a precise sequence. Furthermore, even the most primitive life required two special capabilities: a means of extracting energy from its environment, and a means of encoding and replicating information in order to make faithful copies of itself. Biologists today can see ways that either of these capabilities might have formed in a natural environment, but we are still a long way from knowing how the two came together in the first life-forms.

We have no solid evidence for the pathway that led to the origin of life on our planet except for whatever early history may be retained in the biochemistry of modern life. Indeed, we have very little direct evidence of what Earth itself was like during its earliest history—our planet is so effective at resurfacing itself through plate tectonics (see the chapter on [Earth as a Planet](#)) that very few rocks remain from this early period. In the earlier chapter on [Cratered Worlds](#), you learned that Earth was subjected to a heavy bombardment—a period of large impact events—some 3.8 to 4.1 billion years ago. Large impacts would have been energetic enough to heat-sterilize the surface layers of Earth, so that even if life had begun by this time, it might well have been wiped out.

When the large impacts ceased, the scene was set for a more peaceful environment on our planet. If the oceans of Earth contained accumulated organic material from any of the sources already mentioned, the ingredients were available to make living organisms. We do not understand in any detail the sequence of events that led from molecules to biology, but there is fossil evidence of microbial life in 3.5-billion-year-old

rocks, and possible (debated) evidence for life as far back as 3.8 billion years.

Life as we know it employs two main molecular systems: the functional molecules known as proteins, which carry out the chemical work of the cell, and information-containing molecules of **DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid)** that store information about how to create the cell and its chemical and structural components. The origin of life is sometimes considered a “chicken and egg problem” because, in modern biology, neither of these systems works without the other. It is our proteins that assemble DNA strands in the precise order required to store information, but the proteins are created based on information stored in DNA. Which came first? Some origin of life researchers believe that prebiotic chemistry was based on molecules that could both store information and do the chemical work of the cell. It has been suggested that **RNA (ribonucleic acid)**, a molecule that aids in the flow of genetic information from DNA to proteins, might have served such a purpose. The idea of an early “RNA world” has become increasingly accepted, but a great deal remains to be understood about the origin of life.

Perhaps the most important innovation in the history of biology, apart from the origin of life itself, was the discovery of the process of **photosynthesis**, the complex sequence of chemical reactions through which some living things can use sunlight to manufacture products that store energy (such as carbohydrates), releasing oxygen as one by-product. Previously, life had to make do with sources of chemical energy available on Earth or delivered from space. But the abundant energy available in sunlight could support a larger and more productive biosphere, as well as some biochemical reactions not previously possible for life. One of these was the production of oxygen (as a waste product) from carbon dioxide, and the increase in atmospheric levels of oxygen about 2.4 billion years ago means that oxygen-producing photosynthesis must have emerged and become globally important by this time. In fact, it is likely that oxygen-producing photosynthesis emerged considerably earlier.

Some forms of chemical evidence contained in ancient rocks, such as the solid, layered rock formations known as **stromatolites**, are thought to be the fossils of oxygen-producing photosynthetic bacteria in rocks that are almost 3.5 billion years old (Figure 30.5). It is generally thought that a simpler form of photosynthesis that does not produce oxygen (and is still used by some bacteria today) probably preceded oxygen-producing photosynthesis, and there is strong fossil evidence that one or the other type of photosynthesis was functioning on Earth at least as far back as 3.4 billion years ago.



(a)



(b)

Figure 30.5 Stromatolites Preserve the Earliest Physical Representation of Life on Earth. In their reach for sunlight, the single-celled microbes formed mats that trapped sediments in the water above them. Such trapped sediments fell and formed layers on top of the mats. The microbes then climbed atop the sediment layers and trapped more sediment. What is found in the rock record are (a) the solidified, curved sedimentary layers that are signatures of biological activity. The earliest known stromatolite is 3.47 billion years old and is found in Western Australia. (b) This more recent example is in Lake Thetis, also in Western Australia. (credit a: modification of work by James St. John; credit b: modification of work by Ruth Ellison)

The free oxygen produced by photosynthesis began accumulating in our atmosphere about 2.4 billion years ago. The interaction of sunlight with oxygen can produce ozone (which has three atoms of oxygen per molecule, as compared to the two atoms per molecule in the oxygen we breathe), which accumulated in a

layer high in Earth's atmosphere. As it does on Earth today, this ozone provided protection from the Sun's damaging ultraviolet radiation. This allowed life to colonize the landmasses of our planet instead of remaining only in the ocean.

The rise in oxygen levels was deadly to some microbes because, as a highly reactive chemical, it can irreversibly damage some of the biomolecules that early life had developed in the absence of oxygen. For other microbes, it was a boon: combining oxygen with organic matter or other reduced chemicals generates a lot of energy—you can see this when a log burns, for example—and many forms of life adopted this way of living. This new energy source made possible a great proliferation of organisms, which continued to evolve in an oxygen-rich environment.

The details of that evolution are properly the subject of biology courses, but the process of evolution by natural selection (survival of the fittest) provides a clear explanation for the development of Earth's remarkable variety of life-forms. It does not, however, directly solve the mystery of life's earliest beginnings. We hypothesize that life will arise whenever conditions are appropriate, but this hypothesis is just another form of the Copernican principle. We now have the potential to address this hypothesis with observations. If a second example of life is found in our solar system or a nearby star, it would imply that life emerges commonly enough that the universe is likely filled with biology. To make such observations, however, we must first decide where to focus our search.

LINK TO LEARNING



Just how did life arise in the first place? And could it have happened with a different type of chemistry? Watch the 15-minute video [Making Matter Come Alive \(https://openstax.org/l/30makmattcomali\)](https://openstax.org/l/30makmattcomali) in which a chemistry expert explores some answers to these questions, from a 2011 TED Talk.

Habitable Environments

Among the staggering number of objects in our solar system, Galaxy, and universe, some may have conditions suitable for life, while others do not. Understanding what conditions and features make a **habitable environment**—an environment capable of hosting life—is important both for understanding how widespread habitable environments may be in the universe and for focusing a search for life beyond Earth. Here, we discuss habitability from the perspective of the life we know. We will explore the basic requirements of life and, in the following section, consider the full range of environmental conditions on Earth where life is found. While we can't entirely rule out the possibility that other life-forms might have biochemistry based on alternatives to carbon and liquid water, such life "as we don't know it" is still completely speculative. In our discussion here, we are focusing on habitability for life that is chemically similar to that on Earth.

Life requires a solvent (a liquid in which chemicals can dissolve) that enables the construction of biomolecules and the interactions between them. For life as we know it, that solvent is water, which has a variety of properties that are critical to how our biochemistry works. Water is abundant in the universe, but life requires that water be in liquid form (rather than ice or gas) in order to properly fill its role in biochemistry. That is the case only within a certain range of temperatures and pressures—too high or too low in either variable, and water takes the form of a solid or a gas. Identifying environments where water is present within the appropriate range of temperature and pressure is thus an important first step in identifying habitable environments. Indeed, a "follow the water" strategy has been, and continues to be, a key driver in the exploration of planets both within and beyond our solar system.

Our biochemistry is based on molecules made of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and sulfur. Carbon is at the core of organic chemistry. Its ability to form four bonds, both with itself and with the other elements of life, allows for the formation of a vast number of potential molecules on which to base

biochemistry. The remaining elements contribute structure and chemical reactivity to our biomolecules, and form the basis of many of the interactions among them. These “biogenic elements,” sometimes referred to with the acronym CHNOPS (carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and sulfur), are the raw materials from which life is assembled, and an accessible supply of them is a second requirement of habitability.

As we learned in previous chapters on nuclear fusion and the life story of the stars, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and sulfur are all formed by fusion within stars and then distributed out into their galaxy as those stars die. But how they are distributed among the planets that form within a new star system, in what form, and how chemical, physical, and geological processes on those planets cycle the elements into structures that are accessible to biology, can have significant impacts on the distribution of life. In Earth’s oceans, for example, the abundance of phytoplankton (simple organisms that are the base of the ocean food chain) in surface waters can vary by a thousand-fold because the supply of nitrogen differs from place to place ([Figure 30.6](#)). Understanding what processes control the accessibility of elements at all scales is thus a critical part of identifying habitable environments.

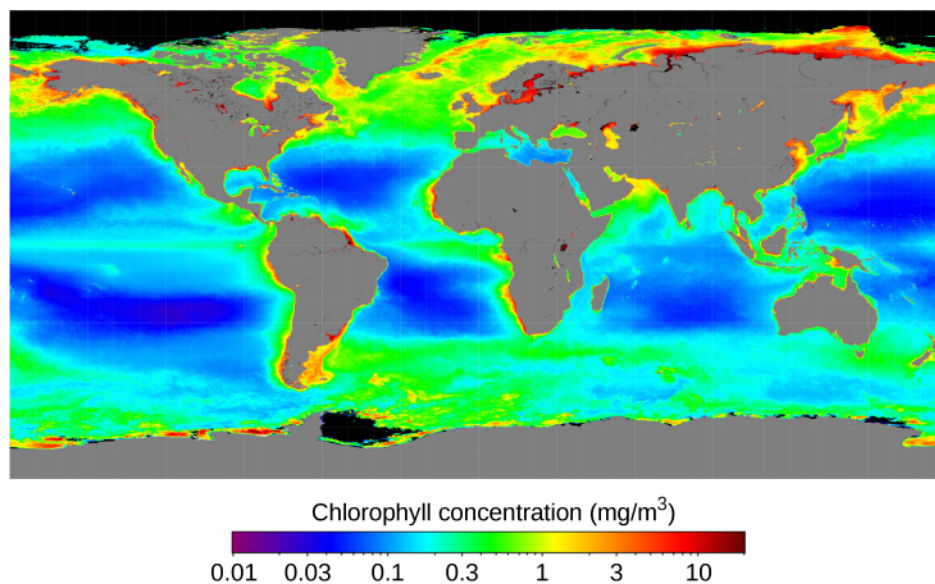


Figure 30.6 Chlorophyll Abundance. The abundance of chlorophyll (an indicator of photosynthetic bacteria and algae) varies by almost a thousand-fold across the ocean basins. That variation is almost entirely due to the availability of nitrogen—one of the major “biogenic elements” in forms that can be used by life. (credit: modification of work by NASA, Gene C. Feldman)

With these first two requirements, we have the elemental raw materials of life and a solvent in which to assemble them into the complicated molecules that drive our biochemistry. But carrying out that assembly and maintaining the complicated biochemical machinery of life takes energy. You fulfill your own requirement for energy every time you eat food or take a breath, and you would not live for long if you failed to do either on a regular basis. Life on Earth makes use of two main types of energy: for you, these are the oxygen in the air you breathe and the organic molecules in your food. But life overall can use a much wider array of chemicals and, while all animals require oxygen, many bacteria do not. One of the earliest known life processes, which still operates in some modern microorganisms, combines hydrogen and carbon dioxide to make methane, releasing energy in the process. There are microorganisms that “breathe” metals that would be toxic to us, and even some that breathe in sulfur and breathe out sulfuric acid. Plants and photosynthetic microorganisms have also evolved mechanisms to use the energy in light directly.

Water in the liquid phase, the biogenic elements, and energy are the fundamental requirements for habitability. But are there additional environmental constraints? We consider this in the next section.



Figure 30.7 Grand Prismatic Spring in Yellowstone National Park. This hot spring, where water emerges from the bluish center at temperatures near the local boiling point (about 92 °C), supports a thriving array of microbial life. The green, yellow, and orange colors around the edges come from thick “mats” of photosynthetic bacteria. In fact, their coloration in part demonstrates their use of light energy—some wavelengths of incoming sunlight are selectively captured for energy; the rest are reflected back. Since it lacks the captured wavelengths, this light is now different in color than the sunlight that illuminates it. The blue part of the spring has temperatures too high to allow photosynthetic life (hence the lack of color except that supplied by water itself), but life is still present. Here, at nearly boiling temperatures, bacteria use the chemical energy supplied by the combination of hydrogen and other chemicals with oxygen. (credit: modification of work by Domenico Salvagnin)

Life in Extreme Conditions

At a chemical level, life consists of many types of molecules that interact with one another to carry out the processes of life. In addition to water, elemental raw materials, and energy, life also needs an environment in which those complicated molecules are stable (don't break down before they can do their jobs) and their interactions are possible. Your own biochemistry works properly only within a very narrow range of about 10 °C in body temperature and two-tenths of a unit in blood pH (pH is a numerical measure of acidity, or the amount of free hydrogen ions). Beyond those limits, you are in serious danger.

Life overall must also have limits to the conditions in which it can properly work but, as we will see, they are much broader than human limits. The resources that fuel life are distributed across a very wide range of conditions. For example, there is abundant chemical energy to be had in hot springs that are essentially boiling acid (see [Figure 30.7](#)). This provides ample incentive for evolution to fill as much of that range with life as is biochemically possible. An organism (usually a microbe) that tolerates or even thrives under conditions that most of the life around us would consider hostile, such as very high or low temperature or acidity, is known as an **extremophile** (where the suffix *-phile* means “lover of”). Let's have a look at some of the conditions that can challenge life and the organisms that have managed to carve out a niche at the far reaches of possibility.

Both high and low temperatures can cause a problem for life. As a large organism, you are able to maintain an almost constant body temperature whether it is colder or warmer in the environment around you. But this is not possible at the tiny size of microorganisms; whatever the temperature in the outside world is also the temperature of the microbe, and its biochemistry must be able to function at that temperature. High temperatures are the enemy of complexity—increasing thermal energy tends to break apart big molecules into smaller and smaller bits, and life needs to stabilize the molecules with stronger bonds and special proteins. But this approach has its limits.

Nevertheless, as noted earlier, high-temperature environments like hot springs and hydrothermal vents often offer abundant sources of chemical energy and therefore drive the evolution of organisms that can tolerate high temperatures (see [Figure 30.8](#)); such an organism is called a **thermophile**. Currently, the high temperature record holder is a methane-producing microorganism that can grow at 122 °C, where the pressure also is so high that water still does not boil. That's amazing when you think about it. We cook our

food—meaning, we alter the chemistry and structure of its biomolecules—by boiling it at a temperature of 100 °C. In fact, food begins to cook at much lower temperatures than this. And yet, there are organisms whose biochemistry remains intact and operates just fine at temperatures 20 degrees higher.

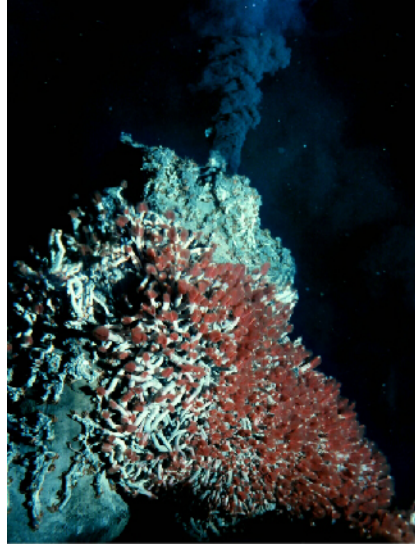


Figure 30.8 Hydrothermal Vent on the Sea Floor. What appears to be black smoke is actually superheated water filled with minerals of metal sulfide. Hydrothermal vent fluid can represent a rich source of chemical energy, and therefore a driver for the evolution of microorganisms that can tolerate high temperatures. Bacteria feeding on this chemical energy form the base of a food chain that can support thriving communities of animals—in this case, a dense patch of red and white tubeworms growing around the base of the vent. (credit: modification of work by the University of Washington; NOAA/OAR/OER)

Cold can also be a problem, in part because it slows down metabolism to very low levels, but also because it can cause physical changes in biomolecules. Cell membranes—the molecular envelopes that surround cells and allow their exchange of chemicals with the world outside—are basically made of fatlike molecules. And just as fat congeals when it cools, membranes crystallize, changing how they function in the exchange of materials in and out of the cell. Some cold-adapted cells (called *psychrophiles*) have changed the chemical composition of their membranes in order to cope with this problem; but again, there are limits. Thus far, the coldest temperature at which any microbe has been shown to reproduce is about $-25\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$.

Conditions that are very acidic or alkaline can also be problematic for life because many of our important molecules, like proteins and DNA, are broken down under such conditions. For example, household drain cleaner, which does its job by breaking down the chemical structure of things like hair clogs, is a very alkaline solution. The most acid-tolerant organisms (*acidophiles*) are capable of living at pH values near zero—about ten million times more acidic than your blood (Figure 30.9). At the other extreme, some *alkaliphiles* can grow at pH levels of about 13, which is comparable to the pH of household bleach and almost a million times more alkaline than your blood.



Figure 30.9 Spain’s Rio Tinto. With a pH close to 2, Rio Tinto is literally a river of acid. Acid-loving microorganisms (acidophiles) not only thrive in these waters, their metabolic activities help generate the acid in the first place. The rusty red color that gives the river its name comes from high levels of iron dissolved in the waters.

High levels of salts in the environment can also cause a problem for life because the salt blocks some cellular functions. Humans recognized this centuries ago and began to salt-cure food to keep it from spoiling—meaning, to keep it from being colonized by microorganisms. Yet some microbes have evolved to grow in water that is saturated in sodium chloride (table salt)—about ten times as salty as seawater ([Figure 30.10](#)).



Figure 30.10 Salt Ponds. The waters of an evaporative salt works near San Francisco are colored pink by thriving communities of photosynthetic organisms. These waters are about ten times as salty as seawater—enough for sodium chloride to begin to crystallize out—yet some organisms can survive and thrive in these conditions. (credit: modification of work by NASA)

Very high pressures can literally squeeze life’s biomolecules, causing them to adopt more compact forms that do not work very well. But we still find life—not just microbial, but even animal life—at the bottoms of our ocean trenches, where pressures are more than 1000 times atmospheric pressure. Many other adaptations to environmental “extremes” are also known. There is even an organism, *Deinococcus radiodurans*, that can tolerate ionizing radiation (such as that released by radioactive elements) a thousand times more intense than you would be able to withstand. It is also very good at surviving extreme desiccation (drying out) and a variety

of metals that would be toxic to humans.

From many such examples, we can conclude that life is capable of tolerating a wide range of environmental extremes—so much so that we have to work hard to identify places where life can't exist. A few such places are known—for example, the waters of hydrothermal vents at over 300 °C appear too hot to support any life—and finding these places helps define the possibility for life elsewhere. The study of extremophiles over the last few decades has expanded our sense of the range of conditions life can survive and, in doing so, has made many scientists more optimistic about the possibility that life might exist beyond Earth.

30.3 Searching for Life beyond Earth

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- › Outline what we have learned from exploration of the environment on Mars
- › Identify where in the solar system life is most likely sustainable and why
- › Describe some key missions and their findings in our search for life beyond our solar system
- › Explain the use of biomarkers in the search for evidence of life beyond our solar system

Astronomers and planetary scientists continue to search for life in the solar system and the universe at large. In this section, we discuss two kinds of searches. First is the direct exploration of planets within our own solar system, especially Mars and some of the icy moons of the outer solar system. Second is the even more difficult task of searching for evidence of life—a **biomarker**—on planets circling other stars. In the next section, we will examine SETI, the *search for extraterrestrial intelligence*. As you will see, the approaches taken in these three cases are very different, even though the goal of each is the same: to determine if life on Earth is unique in the universe.

Life on Mars

The possibility that Mars hosts, or has hosted, life has a rich history dating back to the “canals” that some people claimed to see on the martian surface toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. With the dawn of the space age came the possibility to address this question up close through a progression of missions to Mars that began with the first successful flyby of a robotic spacecraft in 1964 and have led to the deployment of capable rovers, like *Curiosity* and *Perseverance*, with instruments to look for organic chemistry.

The earliest missions to Mars provided some hints that liquid water—one of life's primary requirements—may once have flowed on the surface, and later missions have strengthened this conclusion. The NASA Viking landers, whose purpose was to search directly for evidence of life on Mars, arrived on Mars in 1976. Viking's onboard instruments found no organic molecules (the stuff of which life is made), and no evidence of biological activity in the martian soils it analyzed.

This result is not particularly surprising because, despite the evidence of flowing liquid water in the past, liquid water on the surface of Mars is generally not stable today. Over much of Mars, temperatures and pressures at the surface are so low that pure water would either freeze or boil away (under very low pressures, water will boil at a much lower temperature than usual). To make matters worse, unlike Earth, Mars does not have a magnetic field and ozone layer to protect the surface from harmful solar ultraviolet radiation and energetic particles. However, Viking's analyses of the soil said nothing about whether life may have existed in Mars' distant past, when liquid water was more abundant. We do know that water in the form of ice exists in abundance on Mars, not so deep beneath its surface. Water vapor is also a constituent of the atmosphere of Mars.

Since the visit of Viking, our understanding of Mars has deepened spectacularly. Orbiting spacecraft have provided ever-more detailed images of the surface and detected the presence of minerals that could have formed only in the presence of liquid water. Two bold surface missions, the Mars Exploration Rovers *Spirit* and

Opportunity (2004), followed by the much larger *Curiosity* Rover (2012), confirmed these remote-sensing data. All three rovers found abundant evidence for a past history of liquid water, revealed not only from the mineralogy of rocks they analyzed, but also from the unique layering of rock formations.

Curiosity has gone a step beyond evidence for water and confirmed the existence of habitable environments on ancient Mars. “Habitable” means not only that liquid water was present, but that life’s requirements for energy and elemental raw materials could also have been met. The strongest evidence of an ancient habitable environment came from analyzing a very fine-grained rock called a mudstone—a rock type that is widespread on Earth but was unknown on Mars until *Curiosity* found it (see [Figure 30.11](#)). The mudstone can tell us a great deal about the wet environments in which they formed. The *Perseverance* rover is collecting samples of sedimentary rock in a former lakebed, to later return to Earth for laboratory analysis.



Figure 30.11 Mudstone. Shown are the first holes drilled by NASA’s *Curiosity* Mars rover into a mudstone, with “fresh” drill-pilings around the holes. Notice the difference in color between the red ancient martian surface and the gray newly exposed rock powder that came from the drill holes. Each drill hole is about 0.6 inch (1.6 cm) in diameter. (credit: modification of work by NASA/JPL-Caltech/MSSS)

Five decades of robotic exploration have allowed us to develop a picture of how Mars evolved through time. Early Mars had epochs of warmer and wetter conditions that would have been conducive to life at the surface. However, Mars eventually lost much of its early atmosphere and the surface water began to dry up. As that happened, the ever-shrinking reservoirs of liquid water on the martian surface became saltier and more acidic, until the surface finally had no significant liquid water and was bathed in harsh solar radiation. The surface thus became uninhabitable, but this might not be the case for the planet overall.

Reservoirs of ice and liquid water could still exist underground, where pressure and temperature conditions make it stable. There is recent evidence to suggest that liquid water (probably very salty water) can occasionally (and briefly) flow on the surface even today. Thus, Mars might even have habitable conditions in the present day, but of a much different sort than we normally think of on Earth.

Our study of Mars reveals a planet with a fascinating history—one that saw its ability to host surface life dwindle billions of years ago, but perhaps allowing life to adapt and survive in favorable environmental niches. Even if life did not survive, we expect that we might find evidence of life if it ever took hold on Mars. If it is there, it is hidden in the crust, and we are still learning how best to decipher that evidence.

Life in the Outer Solar System

The massive gas and ice giant planets of the outer solar system—Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune—are almost certainly not habitable for life as we know it, but some of their moons might be (see [Figure 30.12](#)). Although these worlds in the outer solar system contain abundant water, they receive so little warming sunlight in their distant orbits that it was long believed they would be “geologically dead” balls of hard-frozen ice and rock. But, as we saw in the chapter on [Rings, Moons, and Pluto](#), missions to the outer solar system have found something much more interesting.

Jupiter's moon Europa revealed itself to the Voyager and Galileo missions as an active world whose icy surface apparently conceals an ocean with a depth of tens to perhaps a hundred kilometers. As the moon orbits Jupiter, the planet's massive gravity creates tides on Europa—just as our own Moon's gravity creates our ocean tides—and the friction of all that pushing and pulling generates enough heat to keep the water in liquid form (Figure 30.13). Similar tides act upon other moons if they orbit close to the planet. Scientists now think that six or more of the outer solar system's icy moons may harbor liquid water oceans for the same reason. Among these, Europa and Enceladus, a moon of Saturn, have thus far been of greatest interest to astrobiologists.

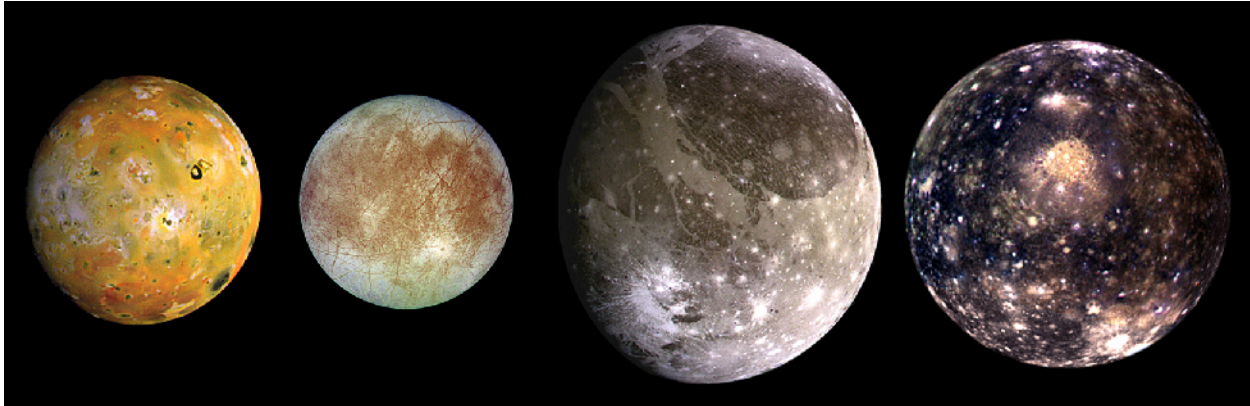


Figure 30.12 Jupiter's Moons. The Galilean moons of Jupiter are shown to relative scale and arranged in order of their orbital distance from Jupiter. At far left, Io orbits closest to Jupiter and so experiences the strongest tidal heating by Jupiter's massive gravity. This effect is so strong that Io is thought to be the most volcanically active body in our solar system. At far right, Callisto shows a surface scarred by billions of years' worth of craters—an indication that the moon's surface is old and that Callisto may be far less active than its sibling moons. Between these hot and cold extremes, Europa, second from left, orbits at a distance where Jupiter's tidal heating may be “just right” to sustain a liquid water ocean beneath its icy crust. (credit: modification of work by NASA/JPL/DLR)

Europa has probably had an ocean for most or all of its history, but habitability requires more than just liquid water. Life also requires energy, and because sunlight does not penetrate below the kilometers-thick ice crust of Europa, this would have to be chemical energy. One of Europa's key attributes from an astrobiology perspective is that its ocean is most likely in direct contact with an underlying rocky mantle, and the interaction of water and rocks—especially at high temperatures, as within Earth's hydrothermal vent systems—yields a *reducing chemistry* (where molecules tend to give up electrons readily) that is like one half of a chemical battery. To complete the battery and provide energy that could be used by life requires that an *oxidizing chemistry* (where molecules tend to accept electrons readily) also be available. On Earth, when chemically reducing vent fluids meet oxygen-containing seawater, the energy that becomes available often supports thriving communities of microorganisms and animals on the sea floor, far from the light of the Sun.

The Galileo mission found that Europa's icy surface does contain an abundance of oxidizing chemicals. This means that availability of energy to support life depends very much on whether the chemistry of the surface and the ocean can mix, despite the kilometers of ice in between. That Europa's ice crust appears geologically “young” (only tens of millions of years old, on average) and that it is active makes it tantalizing to think that such mixing might indeed occur. Understanding whether and how much exchange occurs between the surface and ocean of Europa will be a key science objective of future missions to Europa, and a major step forward in understanding whether this moon could be a cradle of life.

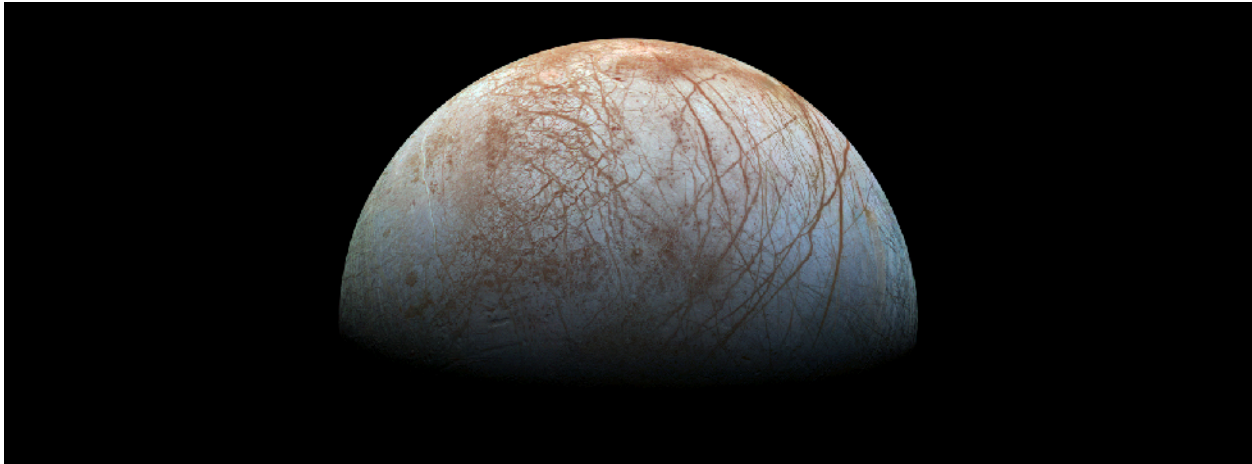


Figure 30.13 Jupiter's Moon Europa, as Imaged by NASA's Galileo Mission. The relative scarcity of craters on Europa suggests a surface that is “geologically young,” and the network of colored ridges and cracks suggests constant activity and motion. Galileo's instruments also strongly suggested the presence of a massive ocean of salty liquid water beneath the icy crust. (credit: modification of work by NASA/JPL-Caltech/SETI Institute)

In 2005, the Cassini mission performed a close flyby of a small (500-kilometer diameter) moon of Saturn, Enceladus ([Figure 30.14](#)), and made a remarkable discovery. Plumes of gas and icy material were venting from the moon's south polar region at a collective rate of about 250 kilograms of material per second. Several observations, including the discovery of salts associated with the icy material, suggest that their source is a liquid water ocean beneath tens of kilometers of ice. Although it remains to be shown definitively whether the ocean is local or global, transient or long-lived, it does appear to be in contact, and to have reacted, with a rocky interior. As on Europa, this is probably a necessary—though not sufficient—condition for habitability. What makes Enceladus so enticing to planetary scientists, though, are those plumes of material that seem to come directly from its ocean: samples of the interior are there for the taking by any spacecraft sent flying through. For a future mission, such samples could yield evidence not only of whether Enceladus is habitable but, indeed, of whether it is home to life.

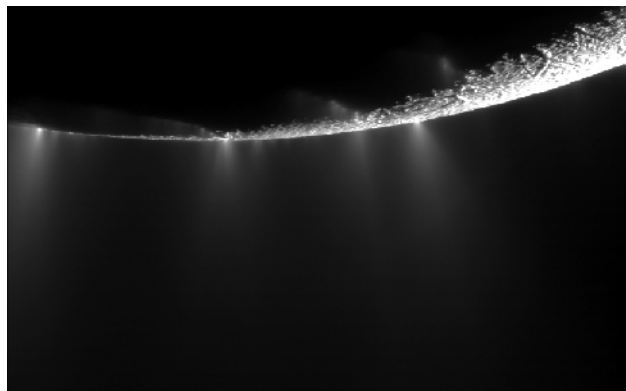


Figure 30.14 Image of Saturn's Moon Enceladus from NASA's Cassini Mission. The south polar region was found to have multiple plumes of ice and gas that, combined, are venting about 250 kilograms of material per second into space. Such features suggest that Enceladus, like Europa, has a sub-ice ocean. (credit: NASA/JPL/ SSI)

Saturn's big moon Titan is very different from both Enceladus and Europa (see [Figure 30.15](#)). Although it may host a liquid water layer deep within its interior, it is the surface of Titan and its unusual chemistry that makes this moon such an interesting place. Titan's thick atmosphere—the only one among moons in the solar system—is composed mostly of nitrogen but also of about 5% methane. In the upper atmosphere, the Sun's ultraviolet light breaks apart and recombines these molecules into more complex organic compounds that are collectively known as *tholins*. The tholins shroud Titan in an orange haze, and imagery from Cassini and from the Huygens probe that descended to Titan's surface show that heavier particles appear to accumulate on the surface, even forming “dunes” that are cut and sculpted by flows of liquid hydrocarbons (such as liquid

methane). Some scientists see this organic chemical factory as a natural laboratory that may yield some clues about the solar system’s early chemistry—perhaps even chemistry that could support the origin of life.

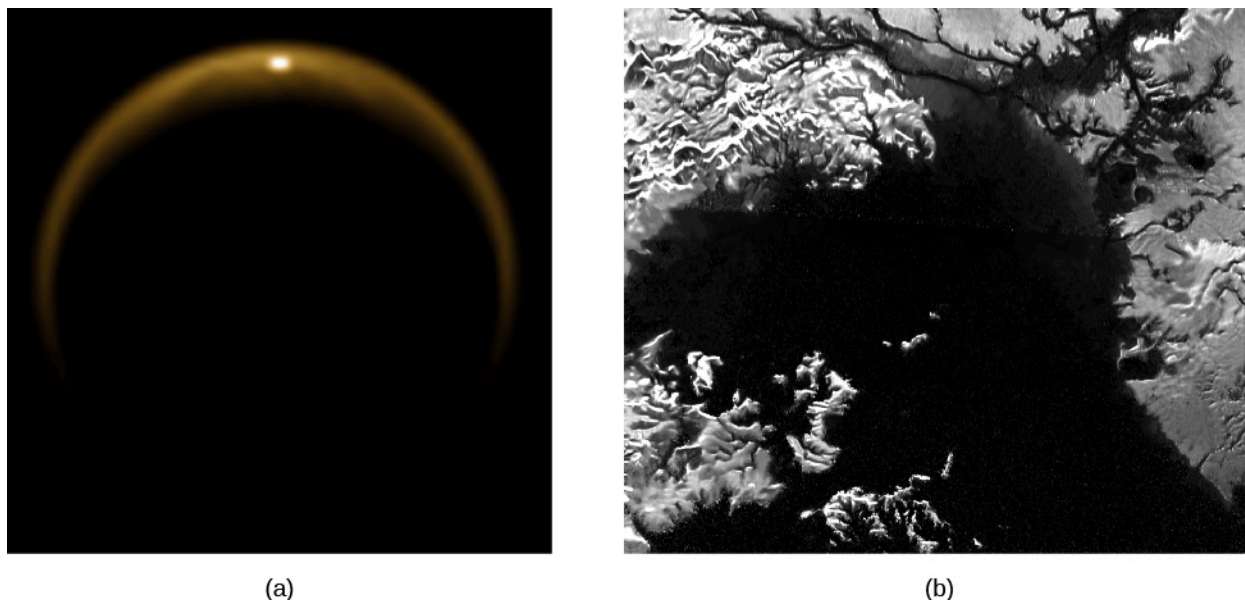


Figure 30.15 Image of Saturn’s Moon Titan from NASA’s Cassini Mission. (a) The hazy orange glow comes from Titan’s thick atmosphere (the only one known among the moons of the solar system). That atmosphere is mostly nitrogen but also contains methane and potentially a variety of complex organic compounds. The bright spot near the top of the image is sunlight reflected from a very flat surface—almost certainly a liquid. We see this effect, called “glint,” when sunlight reflects off the surface of a lake or ocean. (b) Cassini radar imagery shows what look very much like landforms and lakes on the surface of Titan. But the surface lakes and oceans of Titan are not water; they are probably made of liquid hydrocarbons like methane and ethane. (credit a: modification of work by NASA/JPL/University of Arizona/DLR; credit b: modification of work by NASA/JPL-Caltech/ASI)

LINK TO LEARNING



In January 2005, the Huygens probe descended to the surface of Titan and relayed data, including imagery of the landing site, for about 90 minutes. You can watch a [video \(https://openstax.org/l/30huytatsurf\)](https://openstax.org/l/30huytatsurf) about the descent of Huygens to Titan’s surface.

Habitable Planets Orbiting Other Stars

One of the most exciting developments in astronomy during the last two decades is the ability to detect exoplanets—planets orbiting other stars. As we saw in the chapter on the formation of stars and planets, since the discovery of the first exoplanet in 1995, there have been thousands of confirmed detections, and many more candidates that are not yet confirmed. These include several dozen possibly habitable exoplanets. Such numbers finally allow us to make some predictions about exoplanets and their life-hosting potential. The majority of stars with mass similar to the Sun appear to host at least one planet, with multi-planet systems like our own not unusual. How many of these planets might be habitable, and how could we search for life there?

LINK TO LEARNING



The [NASA Exoplanet Archive \(https://openstax.org/l/30NASAexoarc\)](https://openstax.org/l/30NASAexoarc) is an up-to-date searchable online source of data and tools on everything to do with exoplanets. Explore stellar and exoplanet parameters and characteristics, find the latest news on exoplanet discoveries, plot your own data interactively, and link to other related resources.

In evaluating the prospect for life in distant planetary systems, astrobiologists have developed the idea of a **habitable zone**—a region around a star where suitable conditions might exist for life. This concept focuses on life’s requirement for liquid water, and the habitable zone is generally thought of as the range of distances from the central star in which water could be present in liquid form at a planet’s surface. In our own solar system, for example, Venus has surface temperatures far above the boiling point of water and Mars has surface temperatures that are almost always below the freezing point of water. Earth, which orbits between the two, has a surface temperature that is “just right” to keep much of our surface water in liquid form.

Whether surface temperatures are suitable for maintaining liquid water depends on a planet’s “radiation budget” —how much starlight energy it absorbs and retains—and whether or how processes like winds and ocean circulation distribute that energy around the planet. How much stellar energy a planet receives, in turn, depends on how much and what sort of light the star emits and how far the planet is from that star,¹ how much it reflects back to space, and how effectively the planet’s atmosphere can retain heat through the greenhouse effect (see [Earth as a Planet](#)). All of these can vary substantially, and all matter a lot. For example, Venus receives about twice as much starlight per square meter as Earth but, because of its dense cloud cover, also reflects about twice as much of that light back to space as Earth does. Mars receives only about half as much starlight as Earth, but also reflects only about half as much. Thus, despite their differing orbital distances, the three planets actually absorb comparable amounts of sunlight energy. Why, then, are they so dramatically different?

As we learned in several chapters about the planets, some of the gases that make up planetary atmospheres are very effective at trapping infrared light—the very range of wavelengths at which planets radiate thermal energy back out to space—and this can raise the planet’s surface temperature quite a bit more than would otherwise be the case. This is the same “greenhouse effect” that is of such concern for global warming on our planet. Earth’s natural greenhouse effect, which comes mostly from water vapor and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, raises our average surface temperature by about 33 °C over the value it would have if there were no greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Mars has a very thin atmosphere and thus very little greenhouse warming (about 2 °C worth), while Venus has a massive carbon dioxide atmosphere that creates very strong greenhouse warming (about 510 °C worth). These worlds are much colder and much hotter, respectively, than Earth would be if moved into their orbits. Thus, we must consider the nature of any atmosphere as well as the distance from the star in evaluating the range of habitability.

Of course, as we have learned, stars also vary widely in the intensity and spectrum (the wavelengths of light) they emit. Some are much brighter and hotter (bluer), while others are significantly dimmer and cooler (redder), and the distance of the habitable zone varies accordingly. For example, the habitable zone around M-dwarf stars is 3 to 30 times closer in than for G-type (Sun-like) stars. There is a lot of interest in whether such systems could be habitable because—although they have some potential downsides for supporting life—M-dwarf stars are by far the most numerous and long-lived in our Galaxy.

The luminosity of stars like the Sun also increases over their main-sequence lifetime, and this means that the habitable zone migrates outward as a star system ages. Calculations indicate that the power output of the Sun, for example, has increased by at least 30% over the past 4 billion years. Thus, Venus was once within the habitable zone, while Earth received a level of solar energy insufficient to keep the modern Earth (with its present atmosphere) from freezing over. In spite of this, there is plenty of geological evidence that liquid water was present on Earth’s surface billions of years ago. The phenomenon of increasing stellar output and an outwardly migrating habitable zone has led to another concept: the *continuously* habitable zone is defined by the range of orbits that would remain within the habitable zone during the entire lifetime of the star system. As you might imagine, the continuously habitable zone is quite a bit narrower than the habitable zone

¹ The amount of starlight received per unit area of a planet’s surface (per square meter, for example) decreases with the square of the distance from the star. Thus, when the orbital distance doubles, the illumination decreases by 4 times (2^2), and when the orbital distance increases tenfold, the illumination decreases by 100 times (10^2). Venus and Mars orbit the sun at about 72% and 152% of Earth’s orbital distance, respectively, so Venus receives about $1/(0.72)^2 = 1.92$ (about twice) and Mars about $1/(1.52)^2 = 0.43$ (about half) as much light per square meter of planet surface as Earth does.

is at any one time in a star’s history. The nearest star to the Sun, Proxima Centauri, is an M star that has a planet with a mass of at least 1.3 Earth masses, taking about 11 days to orbit. At the distance for such a quick orbit (0.05 AU), the planet may be in the habitable zone of its star, although whether conditions on such a planet near such a star are hospitable for life is a matter of great scientific debate.

Even when planets orbit within the habitable zone of their star, it is no guarantee that they are habitable. For example, Venus today has virtually no water, so even if it were suddenly moved to a “just right” orbit within the habitable zone, a critical requirement for life would still be lacking.

Scientists are working to understand all the factors that define the habitable zone and the habitability of planets orbiting within that zone because this will be our primary guide in targeting exoplanets on which to seek evidence of life. As technology for detecting exoplanets has advanced, so too has our potential to find Earth-size worlds within the habitable zones of their parent stars. Of the confirmed or candidate exoplanets known at the time of writing, nearly 300 are considered to be orbiting within the habitable zone and more than 10% of those are roughly Earth-size.

LINK TO LEARNING



Explore the habitable universe at the online [Planetary Habitability Laboratory \(https://openstax.org//30planhabitolab\)](https://openstax.org//30planhabitolab) created by the University of Puerto Rico at Arecibo. See the potentially habitable exoplanets and other interesting places in the universe, watch video clips, and link to numerous related resources on astrobiology.

Biomarkers

Our observations suggest increasingly that Earth-size planets orbiting within the habitable zone may be common in the Galaxy—current estimates suggest that more than 40% of stars have at least one. But are any of them inhabited? With no ability to send probes there to sample, we will have to derive the answer from the light and other radiation that come to us from these faraway systems ([Figure 30.16](#)). What types of observations might constitute good evidence for life?

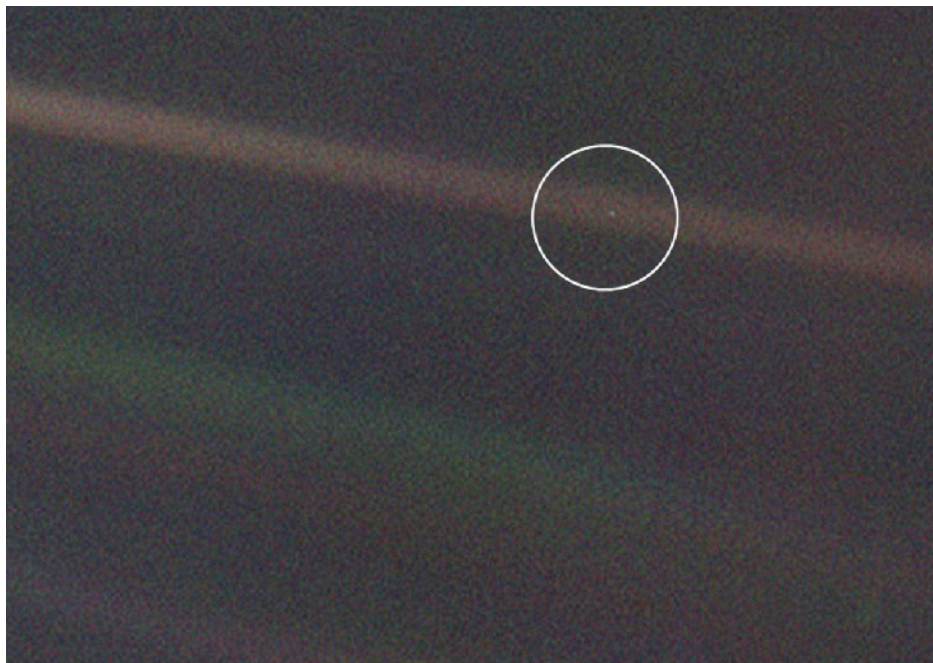


Figure 30.16 Earth, as Seen by NASA’s Voyager 1. In this image, taken from 4 billion miles away, Earth appears as a “pale blue dot”

representing less than a pixel's worth of light. Would this light reveal Earth as a habitable and inhabited world? Our search for life on exoplanets will depend on an ability to extract information about life from the faint light of faraway worlds. (credit: modification of work by NASA/JPL-Caltech)

To be sure, we need to look for robust biospheres (atmospheres, surfaces, and/or oceans) capable of creating planet-scale change. Earth hosts such a biosphere: the composition of our atmosphere and the spectrum of light reflected from our planet differ considerably from what would be expected in the absence of life. Presently, Earth is the only body in our solar system for which this is true, despite the possibility that habitable conditions might prevail in the subsurface of Mars or inside the icy moons of the outer solar system. Even if life exists on these worlds, it is very unlikely that it could yield planet-scale changes that are both telescopically observable and clearly biological in origin.

What makes Earth “special” among the potentially habitable worlds in our solar system is that it has a photosynthetic biosphere. This requires the presence of liquid water at the planet's surface, where organisms have direct access to sunlight. The habitable zone concept focuses on this requirement for surface liquid water—even though we know that subsurface habitable conditions could prevail at more distant orbits—exactly because these worlds would have biospheres detectable at a distance.

Indeed, plants and photosynthetic microorganisms are so abundant at Earth's surface that they affect the color of the light that our planet reflects out into space—we appear greener in visible wavelengths and reflect more near-infrared light than we otherwise would. Moreover, photosynthesis has changed Earth's atmosphere at a large scale—more than 20% of our atmosphere comes from the photosynthetic waste product, oxygen. Such high levels would be very difficult to explain in the absence of life. Other gases, such as nitrous oxide and methane, when found simultaneously with oxygen, have also been suggested as possible indicators of life. When sufficiently abundant in an atmosphere, such gases could be detected by their effect on the spectrum of light that a planet emits or reflects. (As we saw in the chapter on exoplanets, astronomers today are beginning to have the capability of detecting the spectrum of the atmospheres of some planets orbiting other stars.)

Astronomers have thus concluded that, at least initially, a search for life outside our solar system should focus on exoplanets that are as much like Earth as possible—roughly Earth-size planets orbiting in the habitable zone—and look for the presence of gases in the atmosphere or colors in the visible spectrum that are hard to explain except by the presence of biology. Simple, right? In reality, the search for exoplanet life poses many challenges.

As you might imagine, this task is more challenging for planetary systems that are farther away and, in practical terms, this will limit our search to the habitable worlds closest to our own. Should we become limited to a very small number of nearby targets, it will also become important to consider the habitability of planets orbiting the M-dwarfs we discussed above.

If we manage to separate out a clean signal from the planet and find some features in the light spectrum that might be indicative of life, we will need to work hard to think of any nonbiological process that might account for them. “Life is the hypothesis of last resort,” noted astronomer Carl Sagan—meaning that we must exhaust all other explanations for what we see before claiming to have found evidence of extraterrestrial biology. This requires some understanding of what processes might operate on worlds that we will know relatively little about; what we find on Earth can serve as a guide but also has potential to lead us astray ([Figure 30.17](#)).

Recall, for example, that it would be extremely difficult to account for the abundance of oxygen in Earth's atmosphere except by the presence of biology. But it has been hypothesized that oxygen could build up to substantial levels on planets orbiting M-dwarf stars through the action of ultraviolet radiation on the atmosphere—with no need for biology. It will be critical to understand where such “false positives” might exist in carrying out our search.

We need to understand that we might not be able to detect biospheres even if they exist. Life has flourished on Earth for perhaps 3.5 billion years, but the atmospheric “biosignatures” that, today, would supply good

evidence for life to distant astronomers have not been present for all of that time. Oxygen, for example, accumulated to detectable levels in our atmosphere only a little over 2 billion years ago. Could life on Earth have been detected before that time? Scientists are working actively to understand what additional features might have provided evidence of life on Earth during that early history, and thereby help our chances of finding life beyond.

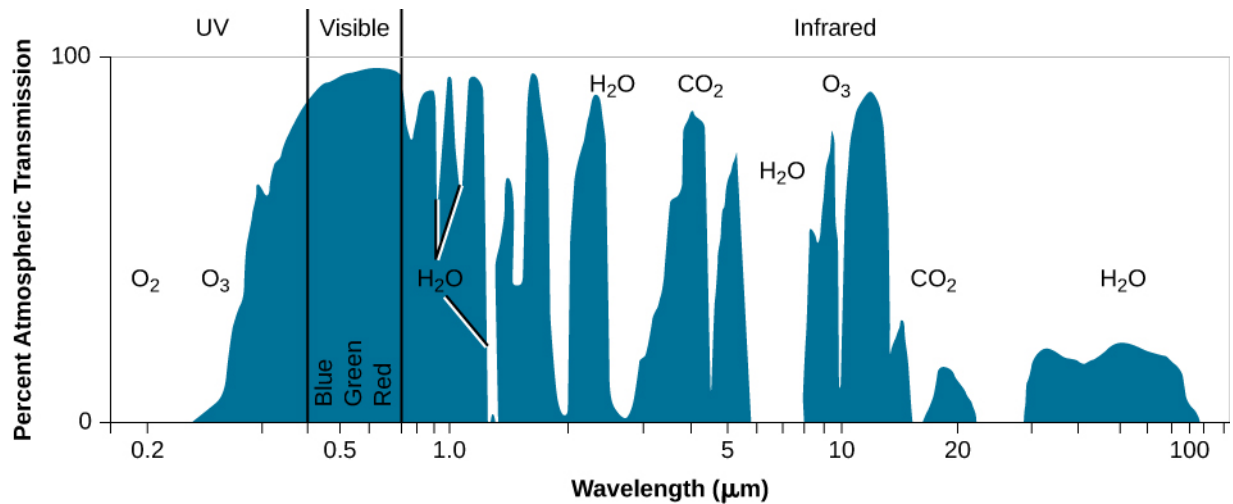


Figure 30.17 Spectrum of Light Transmitted through Earth's Atmosphere. This graph shows wavelengths ranging from ultraviolet (far left) to infrared. The many downward "spikes" come from absorption of particular wavelengths by molecules in Earth's atmosphere. Some of these compounds, like water and the combination oxygen/ozone and methane, might reveal Earth as both habitable and inhabited. We will have to rely on this sort of information to seek life on exoplanets, but our spectra will be of much poorer quality than this one, in part because we will receive so little light from the planet. (credit: modification of work by NASA)

30.4 The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain why spaceships from extraterrestrial civilizations are unlikely to have visited us
- List efforts by humankind to communicate with other civilizations via messages on spacecraft
- Understand the various SETI programs scientists are undertaking

Given all the developments discussed in this chapter, it seems likely that life could have developed on many planets around other stars. Even if that life is microbial, we saw that we may soon have ways to search for chemical biosignatures. This search is of fundamental importance for understanding biology, but it does not answer the question, "Are we alone?" that we raised at the beginning of this chapter. When we ask this question, many people think of other intelligent creatures, perhaps beings that have developed technology similar to our own. If any intelligent, technical civilizations have arisen, as has happened on Earth in the most recent blink of cosmic time, how could we make contact with them?

This problem is similar to making contact with people who live in a remote part of Earth. If students in the United States want to converse with students in Australia, for example, they have two choices. Either one group gets on an airplane and travels to meet the other, or they communicate by sending a message remotely. Given how expensive airline tickets are, most students would probably select the message route.

In the same way, if we want to get in touch with intelligent life around other stars, we can travel, or we can try to exchange messages. Because of the great distances involved, interstellar space travel would be very slow and prohibitively expensive. The fastest spacecraft the human species has built so far would take almost 80,000 years to get to the nearest star. While we could certainly design a faster craft, the more quickly we require it to travel, the greater the energy cost involved. To reach neighboring stars in less than a human life span, we would have to travel close to the speed of light. In that case, however, the expense would become

truly astronomical.

Interstellar Travel

Bernard Oliver, an engineer with an abiding interest in life elsewhere, made a revealing calculation about the costs of rapid interstellar space travel. Since we do not know what sort of technology we (or other civilizations) might someday develop, Oliver considered a trip to the nearest star (and back again) in a spaceship with a “perfect engine”—one that would convert its fuel into energy with 100% efficiency. Even with a perfect engine, the energy cost of a single round-trip journey at 70% the speed of light turns out to be equivalent to several hundred thousand years’ worth of total U.S. electrical energy consumption. The cost of such travel is literally out of this world.

This is one reason astronomers are so skeptical about claims that UFOs are spaceships from extraterrestrial civilizations. Given the distance and energy expense involved, it seems unlikely that the dozens of UFOs (and even UFO abductions) claimed each year could be visitors from other stars so fascinated by Earth civilization that they are willing to expend fantastically large amounts of energy or time to reach us. Nor does it seem credible that these visitors have made this long and expensive journey and then systematically avoided contacting our governments or political and intellectual leaders.

Not every UFO report has been explained (in many cases, the observations are sketchy or contradictory). But investigation almost always converts them to IFOs (identified flying objects) or NFOs (not-at-all flying objects). While some are hoaxes, others are natural phenomena, such as bright planets, ball lightning, fireballs (bright meteors), or even flocks of birds that landed in an oil slick to make their bellies reflective. Still others are human craft, such as private planes with some lights missing, or secret military aircraft. It is also interesting that the group of people who most avidly look at the night sky, the amateur astronomers, have never reported UFO sightings. Further, not a single UFO has ever left behind any physical evidence that can be tested in a laboratory and shown to be of nonterrestrial origin.

Another common aspect of belief that aliens are visiting Earth comes from people who have difficulty accepting human accomplishments. There are many books and TV shows, for example, that assert that humans could not have built the great pyramids of Egypt, and therefore they must have been built by aliens. The huge statues (called Moai) on Easter Island are also sometimes claimed to have been built by aliens. Some people even think that the accomplishments of space exploration today are based on alien technology.

However, the evidence from archaeology and history is clear: ancient monuments were built by ancient *people*, whose brains and ingenuity were every bit as capable as ours are today, even if they didn’t have electronic textbooks like you do.

Messages on Spacecraft

While space travel by living creatures seems very difficult, robot probes can travel over long distances and over long periods of time. Five spacecraft—two Pioneers, two Voyagers, and New Horizons—are now leaving the solar system. At their coasting speeds, they will take hundreds of thousands or millions of years to get anywhere close to another star. On the other hand, they were the first products of human technology to go beyond our home system, so we wanted to put messages on board to show where they came from.

Each Pioneer carries a plaque with a pictorial message engraved on a gold-anodized aluminum plate ([Figure 30.18](#)). The Voyagers, launched in 1977, have audio and video records attached, which allowed the inclusion of over 100 photographs and a selection of music from around the world. Given the enormous space between stars in our section of the Galaxy, it is very unlikely that these messages will ever be received by anyone. They are more like a note in a bottle thrown into the sea by a shipwrecked sailor, with no realistic expectation of its being found soon but a slim hope that perhaps someday, somehow, someone will know of the sender’s fate.

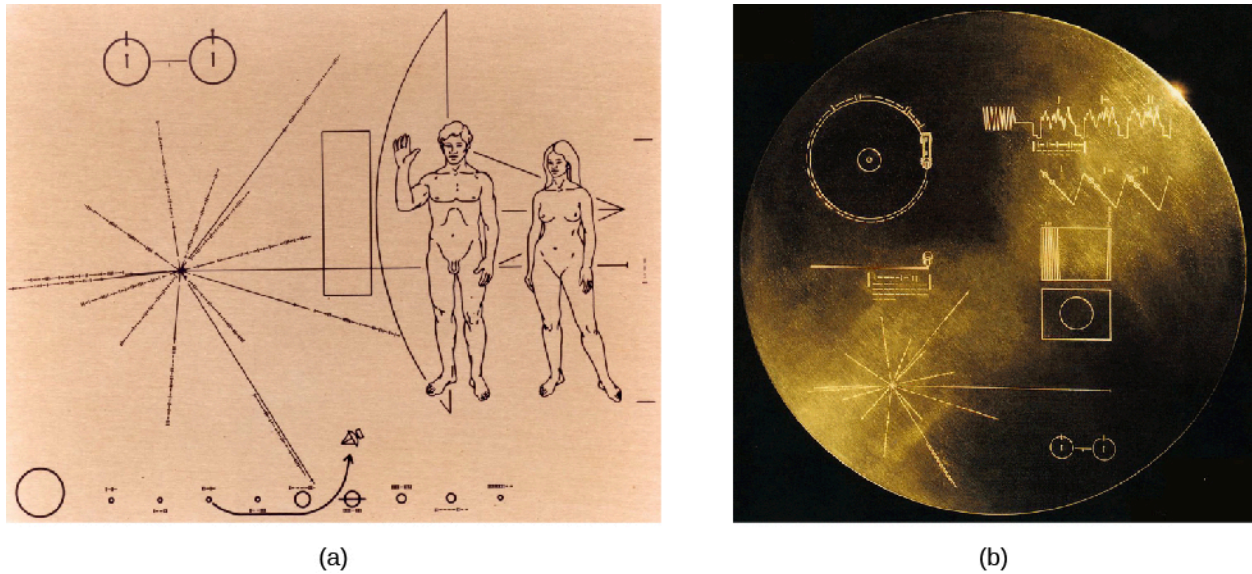


Figure 30.18 Interstellar Messages. (a) This is the image engraved on the plaques aboard the Pioneer 10 and 11 spacecraft. The human figures are drawn in proportion to the spacecraft, which is shown behind them. The Sun and planets in the solar system can be seen at the bottom, with the trajectory that the spacecraft followed. The lines and markings in the left center show the positions and pulse periods for a number of pulsars, which might help locate the spacecraft's origins in space and time. (b) Encoded onto a gold-coated copper disk, the Voyager record contains 118 photographs, 90 minutes of music from around the world, greetings in almost 60 languages, and other audio material. It is a summary of the sights and sounds of Earth. (credit a, b: modification of work by NASA)

MAKING CONNECTIONS



The Voyager Message

An Excerpt from the Voyager Record:

"We cast this message into the cosmos. It is likely to survive a billion years into our future, when our civilization is profoundly altered. . . . If [another] civilization intercepts Voyager and can understand these recorded contents, here is our message:

This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts, and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours. We hope, someday, having solved the problems we face, to join a community of galactic civilizations. This record represents our hope and our determination, and our goodwill in a vast and awesome universe."

—Jimmy Carter, President of the United States of America, June 16, 1977

Communicating with the Stars

If direct visits among stars are unlikely, we must turn to the alternative for making contact: exchanging messages. Here the news is a lot better. We already use a messenger—light or, more generally, electromagnetic waves—that moves through space at the fastest speed in the universe. Traveling at 300,000 kilometers per second, light reaches the nearest star in only 4 years and does so at a tiny fraction of the cost of sending material objects. These advantages are so clear and obvious that we assume they will occur to any other species of intelligent beings that develop technology.

However, we have access to a wide spectrum of electromagnetic radiation, ranging from the longest-wavelength radio waves to the shortest-wavelength gamma rays. Which would be the best for interstellar communication? It would not be smart to select a wavelength that is easily absorbed by interstellar gas and

dust, or one that is unlikely to penetrate the atmosphere of a planet like ours. Nor would we want to pick a wavelength that has lots of competition for attention in our neighborhood.

One final criterion makes the selection easier: we want the radiation to be inexpensive enough to produce in large quantities. When we consider all these requirements, radio waves turn out to be the best answer. Being the lowest-frequency (and lowest-energy) band of the spectrum, they are not very expensive to produce, and we already use them extensively for communications on Earth. They are not significantly absorbed by interstellar dust and gas. With some exceptions, they easily pass through Earth's atmosphere and through the atmospheres of the other planets we are acquainted with.

The Cosmic Haystack

Having made the decision that radio is the most likely means of communication among intelligent civilizations, we still have many questions and a daunting task ahead of us. Shall we *send* a message, or try to *receive* one? Obviously, if every civilization decides to receive only, then no one will be sending, and everyone will be disappointed. On the other hand, it may be appropriate for us to *begin* by listening, since we are likely to be among the most primitive civilizations in the Galaxy who are interested in exchanging messages.

We do not make this statement to insult the human species (which, with certain exceptions, we are rather fond of). Instead, we base it on the fact that humans have had the ability to receive (or send) a radio message across interstellar distances for only a few decades. Compared to the ages of the stars and the Galaxy, this is a mere instant. If there are civilizations out there that are ahead of us in development by even a short time (in the cosmic sense), they are likely to have a technology head start of many, many years.

In other words, we, who have just started, may well be the “youngest” species in the Galaxy with this capability (see the discussion in [Example 30.1](#)). Just as the youngest members of a community are often told to be quiet and listen to their elders for a while before they say something foolish, so may we want to begin our exercise in extraterrestrial communication by listening.

Even restricting our activities to listening, however, leaves us with an array of challenging questions. For example, if an extraterrestrial civilization's signal is too weak to be detected by our present-day radio telescopes, we will not detect them. In addition, it would be very expensive for an extraterrestrial civilization to broadcast on a huge number of channels. Most likely, they select one or a few channels for their particular message. Communicating on a narrow band of channels also helps distinguish an artificial message from the radio static that comes from natural cosmic processes. But the radio band contains an astronomically large number of possible channels. How can we know in advance which one they have selected, and how they have coded their message into the signal?

[Table 30.1](#) summarizes these and other factors that scientists must grapple with when trying to tune in to radio messages from distant civilizations. Because their success depends on either guessing right about so many factors or searching through all the possibilities for each factor, some scientists have compared their quest to looking for a needle in a haystack. Thus, they like to say that the list of factors in [Table 30.1](#) defines the *cosmic haystack problem*.

The Cosmic Haystack Problem: Some Questions about an Extraterrestrial Message

Factors
From which direction (which star) is the message coming?
On what channels (or frequencies) is the message being broadcast?

Table 30.1

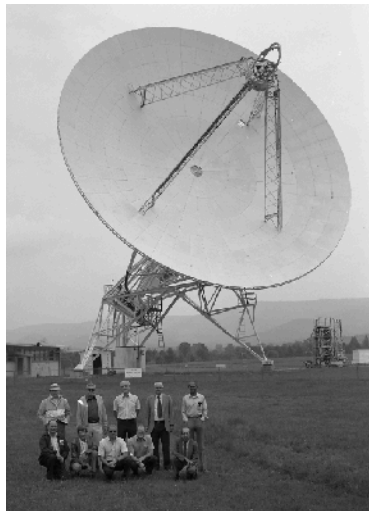
Factors
How wide in frequency is the channel?
How strong is the signal (can our radio telescopes detect it)?
Is the signal continuous, or does it shut off at times (as, for example, a lighthouse beam does when it turns away from us)?
Does the signal drift (change) in frequency because of the changing relative motion of the source and the receiver?
How is the message encoded in the signal (how do we decipher it)?
Can we even recognize a message from a completely alien species? Might it take a form we don't at all expect?

Table 30.1

Radio Searches

Although the cosmic haystack problem seems daunting, many other research problems in astronomy also require a large investment of time, equipment, and patient effort. And, of course, if we don't search, we're sure not to find anything.

The very first search was conducted by astronomer Frank Drake in 1960, using the 85-foot antenna at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory ([Figure 30.19](#)). Called Project Ozma, after the queen of the exotic Land of Oz in the children's stories of L. Frank Baum, his experiment involved looking at about 7200 channels and two nearby stars over a period of 200 hours. Although he found nothing, Drake demonstrated that we had the technology to do such a search, and set the stage for the more sophisticated projects that followed.



(a)



(b)

Figure 30.19 Project Ozma and the Allen Telescope Array. (a) This 25th anniversary photo shows some members of the Project Ozma team standing in front of the 85-foot radio telescope with which the 1960 search for extraterrestrial messages was performed. Frank Drake is in the back row, second from the right. (b) The Allen Telescope Array in California is made up of 42 small antennas linked together. This system allows simultaneous observations of multiple sources with millions of separate frequency channels. (credit a: modification of work by NRAO; credit b: modification of work by Colby Gutierrez-Kraybill)

Receivers are constantly improving, and the sensitivity of SETI programs—**SETI** stands for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence—is advancing rapidly. Equally important, modern electronics and software allow simultaneous searches on millions of frequencies (channels). If we can thus cover a broad frequency range, the cosmic haystack problem of guessing the right frequency largely goes away. One powerful telescope array (funded with an initial contribution from Microsoft founder Paul Allen) that is built for SETI searches is the Allen Telescope in Northern California. Other radio telescopes being used for such searches have included the giant Arecibo radio dish in Puerto Rico (which, sadly, collapsed due to storm damage in late 2020), the recently completed, and even larger, FAST dish in China, and the Green Bank Telescope in West Virginia, which is the largest steerable radio telescope in the world.

In 2015, Silicon Valley investor and philanthropist Yuri Milner donated 100 million dollars to the University of California, Berkeley, to enhance the SETI endeavor for ten years. The project, called *Breakthrough: Listen*, is enlisting more telescopes around the world in the search and is developing sophisticated artificial intelligence programs to scour the incoming signals for intelligent messages. The aim is to search more stars and more channels than any SETI project so far.

What kind of signals do we hope to pick up? We on Earth are inadvertently sending out a flood of radio signals, dominated by military radar systems. This is a kind of leakage signal, similar to the wasted light energy that is beamed upward by poorly designed streetlights and advertising signs. Could we detect a similar leakage of radio signals from another civilization? The answer is just barely, but only for the nearest stars. For the most part, therefore, current radio SETI searches are looking for beacons, assuming that civilizations might be intentionally drawing attention to themselves or perhaps sending a message to another world or outpost that lies in our direction. Our prospects for success depend on how often civilizations arise, how long they last, and how patient they are about broadcasting their locations to the cosmos.

VOYAGERS IN ASTRONOMY



Jill Tarter: Trying to Make Contact

1997 was quite a year for Jill Cornell Tarter ([Figure 30.20](#)), one of the world's leading scientists in the SETI field. The SETI Institute announced that she would be the recipient of its first endowed chair (the equivalent of an endowed research professorship) named in honor of Bernard Oliver. The National Science Foundation approved a proposal by a group of scientists and educators she headed to develop an innovative hands-on high school curriculum based on the ideas of cosmic evolution (the topics of this chapter). And, at roughly the same time, she was being besieged with requests for media interviews as news reports identified her as the model for Ellie Arroway, the protagonist of *Contact*, Carl Sagan's best-selling novel about SETI. The book had been made into a high-budget science fiction film, starring Jodie Foster, who had talked with Tarter before taking the role.



Figure 30.20 Jill Tarter (credit: Christian Schidlowski)

Tarter is quick to point out, “Carl Sagan wrote a book about a woman who does what I do, not about me.” Still, as the only woman in such a senior position in the small field of SETI, she was the center of a great deal of public attention. (However, colleagues and reporters pointed out that this was nothing compared to what would happen if her search for radio signals from other civilizations recorded a success.)

Being the only woman in a group is not a new situation to Tarter, who often found herself the only woman in her advanced science or math classes. Her father had encouraged her, both in her interest in science and her “tinkering.” As an undergraduate at Cornell University, she majored in engineering physics. That training became key to putting together and maintaining the complex systems that automatically scan for signals from other civilizations.

Switching to astrophysics for her graduate studies, she wrote a PhD thesis that, among other topics, considered the formation of failed stars—those whose mass was not sufficient to ignite the nuclear reactions that power more massive stars like our own Sun. Tarter coined the term “brown dwarf” for these small, dim objects, and it has remained the name astronomers use ever since.

It was while she was still in graduate school that Stuart Bowyer, one of her professors at the University of California, Berkeley, asked her if she wanted to be involved in a small experiment to siphon off a bit of radiation from a radio telescope as astronomers used it year in and year out and see if there was any hint of an intelligently coded radio message buried in the radio noise. Her engineering and computer programming skills became essential to the project, and soon she was hooked on the search for life elsewhere.

Thus began an illustrious career working full time searching for what she calls the technosignatures (signs of technology) from extraterrestrial civilizations. Tarter has received many awards, including being elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2002, the Adler Planetarium Women in Space Science Award in 2003, and a 2009 TED Prize.

LINK TO LEARNING



Watch the [TED talk \(https://openstax.org//30TarterSETI\)](https://openstax.org//30TarterSETI) Jill Tarter gave on the fascination of the search for intelligence.

EXAMPLE 30.1

The Drake Equation

At the first scientific meeting devoted to SETI, Frank Drake wrote an equation on the blackboard that took the difficult question of estimating the number of civilizations in the Galaxy and broke it down into a series of smaller, more manageable questions. Ever since then, both astronomers and students have used this **Drake equation** as a means of approaching the most challenging question: How likely is it that we are alone? Since this is at present an unanswerable question, astronomer Jill Tarter has called the Drake equation a “way of organizing our ignorance.” (See [Figure 30.21](#).)

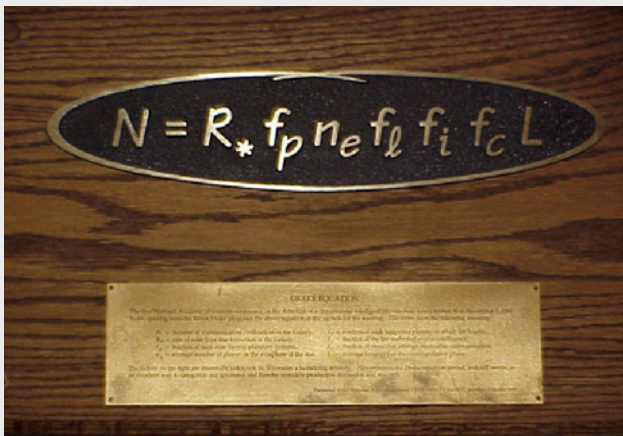


Figure 30.21 Drake Equation. A plaque at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory commemorates the conference where the equation was first discussed. (credit: NRAO/NSF/AUI)

The form of the Drake equation is very simple. To estimate the number of communicating civilizations that currently exist in the Galaxy (we will define these terms more carefully in a moment), we multiply the rate of formation of such civilizations (number per year) by their average lifetime (in years). In symbols,

$$N = R_{\text{total}} \times L$$

To make this formula easier to use (and more interesting), however, Drake separated the rate of formation R_{total} into a series of probabilities:

$$R_{\text{total}} = R_{\text{star}} \times f_p \times f_e \times f_l \times f_i \times f_c$$

R_{star} is the rate of formation of stars like the Sun in our Galaxy, which is, very roughly, around 10 stars per year. Each of the other terms is a fraction or probability (less than or equal to 1.0), and the product of all these probabilities is itself the total probability that each star will have an intelligent, technological, communicating civilization that we might want to talk to. We have:

- f_p = the fraction of these stars with planets
- f_e = the fraction of the planetary systems that include habitable planets
- f_l = the fraction of habitable planets that actually support life
- f_i = the fraction of inhabited planets that develop advanced intelligence
- f_c = the fraction of these intelligent civilizations that develop science and the technology to build radio telescopes and transmitters

Each of these factors can be discussed and perhaps evaluated, but we must guess at many of the values. In particular, we don't know how to calculate the probability of something that happened once on Earth but has not been observed elsewhere—and these include the development of life, of intelligent life, and of technological life (the last three factors in the equation). One important advance in estimating the terms of

the Drake equation comes from the recent discovery of exoplanets. When the Drake equation was first written, no one had any idea whether planets and planetary systems were common. Now we know they are—another example of the Copernican principle.

Solution

Even if we don't know the answers, we can make some guesses and calculate the resulting number N . Let's start with the optimism implicit in the Copernican principle and set the last three terms equal to 1.0. If R is 10 stars/year and if we measure the average lifetime of a technological civilization in years, the units of years cancel. If we also assume that f_p is 0.1, and f_e is 1.0, the equation becomes

$$N = R_{\text{total}} \times L = L$$

Now we see the importance of the term L , the lifetime of a communicating civilization (measured in years). We have had this capability (to communicate at the distances of the stars) for only a few decades.

Check Your Learning

Suppose we assume that this stage in our history lasts only one century.

Answer:

With our optimistic assumptions about the other factors, $L = 100$ years and $N = 100$ such civilizations in the entire Galaxy. In that case, there are so few other civilizations like ours that we are unlikely to detect any signals in a SETI search. But suppose the average lifetime is a million years; in that case, there are a million such civilizations in the Galaxy, and some of them may be within range for radio communication. The most important conclusion from this calculation is that even if we are extremely optimistic about the probabilities, the only way we can expect success from SETI is if other civilizations are much older (and hence probably much more advanced) than ours.

LINK TO LEARNING



Read [Frank Drake's own account \(https://openstax.org/l/30drakeequat\)](https://openstax.org/l/30drakeequat) of how he came up with his "equation." And here is a [recent interview \(https://openstax.org/l/30frandrakinter\)](https://openstax.org/l/30frandrakinter) with Frank Drake by one of the authors of this textbook.

SETI outside the Radio Realm

For the reasons discussed above, most SETI programs search for signals at radio wavelengths. But in science, if there are other approaches to answering an unsolved question, we don't want to neglect them. So astronomers have been thinking about other ways we could pick up evidence for the existence of technologically advanced civilizations.

Recently, technology has allowed astronomers to expand the search into the domain of visible light. You might think that it would be hopeless to try to detect a flash of visible light from a planet given the brilliance of the star it orbits. This is why we usually cannot measure the reflected light of planets around other stars. The feeble light of the planet is simply swamped by the "big light" in the neighborhood. So another civilization would need a mighty strong beacon to compete with their star.

However, in recent years, human engineers have learned how to make flashes of light brighter than the Sun. The trick is to "turn on" the light for a very brief time, so that the costs are manageable. But ultra-bright, ultra-short laser pulses (operating for periods of a billionth of a second) can pack a lot of energy and can be coded to carry a message. We also have the technology to detect such short pulses—not with human senses, but with special detectors that can be "tuned" to hunt automatically for such short bursts of light from nearby

stars.

Why would any civilization try to outshine its own star in this way? It turns out that the cost of sending an ultra-short laser pulse in the direction of a few promising stars can be less than the cost of sweeping a continuous radio message across the whole sky. Or perhaps they, too, have a special fondness for light messages because one of their senses evolved using light. Several programs are now experimenting with “optical SETI” searches, which can be done with only a modest telescope. (The term *optical* here means using visible light.)

If we let our imaginations expand, we might think of other for *technosignatures*—signs of technology from other civilizations. For example, what if a truly advanced civilization should decide to (or need to) renovate its planetary system to maximize the area for life? It could do so by breaking apart some planets or moons and building a ring of solid material that surrounds or encloses the star and intercepts some or all of its light. This huge artificial ring or sphere might glow very brightly at infrared wavelengths, as the starlight it receives is eventually converted to heat and re-radiated into space. That infrared radiation could be detected by our instruments, and searches for such infrared sources are also underway ([Figure 30.22](#)).

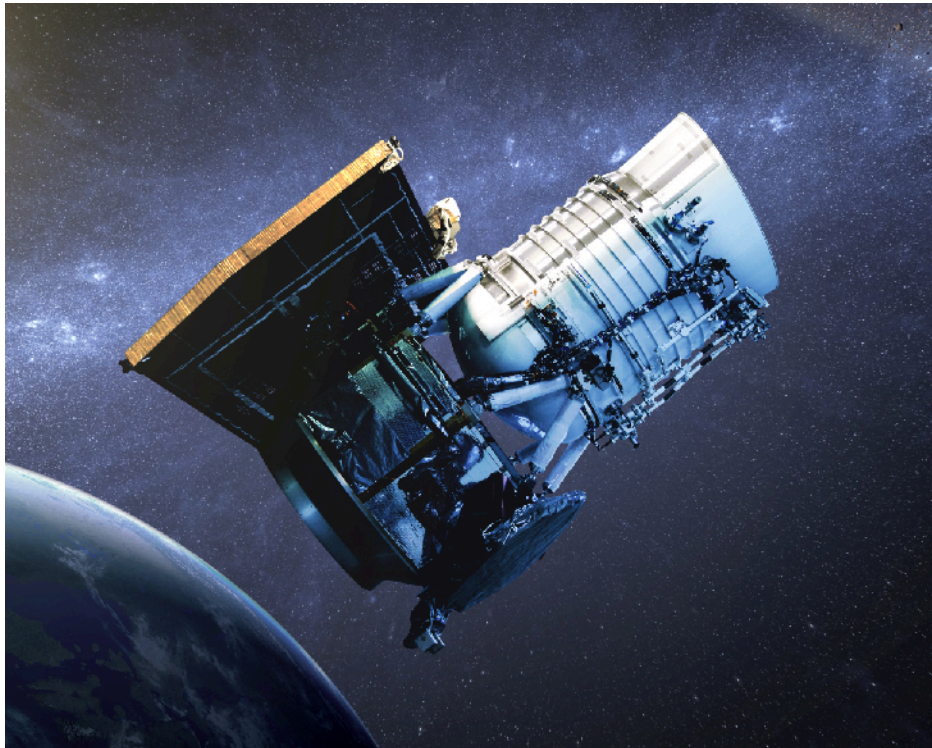


Figure 30.22 Wide-Field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE). Astronomers have used this infrared satellite to search for infrared signatures of enormous construction projects by very advanced civilizations, but their first survey did not reveal any. (credit: modification of work by NASA/JPL-Caltech)

Should We Transmit in Addition to Listening?

Our planet has some leakage of radio waves into space, from FM radio, television, military radars, and communication between Earth and our orbiting spacecraft. However, such leakage radiation is still quite weak, and therefore difficult to detect at the distances of the stars, at least with the radio technology we have. So at the present time our attempts to communicate with other civilizations that may be out there mostly involve trying to receive messages, but not sending any ourselves.

Some scientists, however, think that it is inconsistent to search for beacons from other civilizations without announcing our presence in a similar way. (We discussed earlier the problem that if every other civilization confined itself to listening, no one would ever get in touch.) So, should we be making regular attempts at sending easily decoded messages into space? Some scientists warn that our civilization is too immature and

defenseless to announce ourselves at this early point in our development. The decision whether to transmit or not turns out to be an interesting reflection of how we feel about ourselves and our place in the universe.

Discussions of transmission also raise the question of who should speak for planet Earth. Today, anyone and everyone can broadcast radio signals, and many businesses, religious groups, and governments do. It would be a modest step for the same organizations to use or build large radio telescopes and begin intentional transmissions that are much stronger than the signals that leak from Earth today. And if we intercept a signal from an alien civilization, then the issue arises whether to reply.

Who should make the decision about whether, when, and how humanity announces itself to the cosmos? Is there freedom of speech when it comes to sending radio messages to other civilizations? Do all the nations of Earth have to agree before we send a signal strong enough that it has a serious chance of being received at the distances of the stars? How our species reaches a decision about these kinds of questions may well be a test of whether or not there is intelligent life on Earth.

Conclusion

Whether or not we ultimately turn out to be the only intelligent species in our part of the Galaxy, our exploration of the cosmos will surely continue. An important part of that exploration will still be the search for biomarkers from inhabited planets that have not produced technological creatures that send out radio signals. After all, creatures like butterflies and dolphins may never build radio antennas, but we are happy to share our planet with them and would be delighted to find their counterparts on other worlds.

Whether or not life exists elsewhere is just one of the unsolved problems in astronomy that we have discussed in this book. A humble acknowledgment of how much we have left to learn about the universe is one of the fundamental hallmarks of science. This should not, however, prevent us from feeling exhilarated about how much we have already managed to discover, and feeling curious about what else we might find out in the years to come.

Our progress report on the ideas of astronomy ends here, but we hope that your interest in the universe does not. We hope you will keep up with developments in astronomy through media and online, or by going to an occasional public lecture by a local scientist. Who, after all, can even guess all the amazing things that future research projects will reveal about both the universe and our connection with it?

 Key Terms

amino acids organic compounds that are the molecular building blocks of proteins

astrobiology the multidisciplinary study of life in the universe: its origin, evolution, distribution, and fate; similar terms are *exobiology* and *bioastronomy*

biomarker evidence of the presence of life, especially a global indication of life on a planet that could be detected remotely (such as an unusual atmospheric composition)

DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) a molecule that stores information about how to replicate a cell and its chemical and structural components

Drake equation a formula for estimating the number of intelligent, technological civilizations in our Galaxy, first suggested by Frank Drake

extremophile an organism (usually a microbe) that tolerates or even thrives under conditions that most of the life around us would consider hostile, such as very high or low temperature or acidity

gene the basic functional unit that carries the genetic (hereditary) material contained in a cell

habitable environment an environment capable of hosting life

habitable zone the region around a star in which liquid water could exist on the surface of terrestrial-sized planets, hence the most probable place to look for life in a star's planetary system

organic compound a compound containing carbon, especially a complex carbon compound; not necessarily produced by life

organic molecule a combination of carbon and other atoms—primarily hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and sulfur—some of which serve as the basis for our biochemistry

photosynthesis a complex sequence of chemical reactions through which some living things can use sunlight to manufacture products that store energy (such as carbohydrates), releasing oxygen as one by-product

protein a key biological molecule that provides the structure and function of the body's tissues and organs, and essentially carries out the chemical work of the cell

RNA (ribonucleic acid) a molecule that aids in the flow of genetic information from DNA to proteins

SETI the search for extraterrestrial intelligence; usually applied to searches for radio signals from other civilizations

stromatolites solid, layered rock formations that are thought to be the fossils of oxygen-producing photosynthetic bacteria in rocks that are 3.5 billion years old

thermophile an organism that can tolerate high temperatures

 Summary

30.1 The Cosmic Context for Life

Life on Earth is based on the presence of a key unit known as an organic molecule, a molecule that contains carbon, especially complex hydrocarbons. Our solar system formed about 5 billion years ago from a cloud of gas and dust enriched by several generations of heavier element production in stars. Life is made up of chemical combinations of these elements made by stars. The Copernican principle, which suggests that there is nothing special about our place in the universe, implies that if life could develop on Earth, it should be able to develop in other places as well. The Fermi paradox asks why, if life is common, more advanced life-forms have not contacted us.

30.2 Astrobiology

The study of life in the universe, including its origin on Earth, is called astrobiology. Life as we know it requires water, certain elemental raw materials (carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and sulfur), energy, and an environment in which the complex chemistry of life is stable. Carbon-based (or organic) molecules are abundant in space and may also have been produced by processes on Earth. Life appears to have spread around our planet within 400 million years after the end of heavy bombardment, if not sooner. The actual

origin of life—the processes leading from chemistry to biology—is not completely understood. Once life took hold, it evolved to use many energy sources, including first a range of different chemistries and later light, and diversified across a range of environmental conditions that humans consider “extreme.” This proliferation of life into so many environmental niches, so relatively soon after our planet became habitable, has served to make many scientists optimistic about the chances that life could exist elsewhere.

30.3 Searching for Life beyond Earth

The search for life beyond Earth offers several intriguing targets. Mars appears to have been more similar to Earth during its early history than it is now, with evidence for liquid water on its ancient surface and perhaps even now below ground. The accessibility of the martian surface to our spacecraft offers the exciting potential to directly examine ancient and modern samples for evidence of life. In the outer solar system, the moons Europa and Enceladus likely host vast sub-ice oceans that may directly contact the underlying rocks—a good start in providing habitable conditions—while Titan offers a fascinating laboratory for understanding the sorts of organic chemistry that might ultimately provide materials for life. And the last decade of research on exoplanets leads us to believe that there may be billions of habitable planets in the Milky Way Galaxy. Study of these worlds offers the potential to find biomarkers indicating the presence of life.

30.4 The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence

Some astronomers are engaged in the search for extraterrestrial intelligent life (SETI). Because other planetary systems are so far away, traveling to the stars is either very slow or extremely expensive (in terms of energy required). Despite many UFO reports and tremendous media publicity, there is no evidence that any of these are related to extraterrestrial visits. Scientists have determined that the best way to communicate with any intelligent civilizations out there is by using electromagnetic waves, and radio waves seem best suited to the task. So far, they have only begun to comb the many different possible stars, frequencies, signal types, and other factors that make up what we call the cosmic haystack problem. Some astronomers are also undertaking searches for brief, bright pulses of visible light and infrared signatures of huge construction projects by advanced civilizations. If we do find a signal someday, deciding whether to answer and what to answer may be two of the greatest challenges humanity will face.



For Further Exploration

Articles

Astrobiology

Chyba, C. “The New Search for Life in the Universe.” *Astronomy* (May 2010): 34. An overview of astrobiology and the search for life out there in general, with a brief discussion of the search for intelligence.

Dorminey, B. “A New Way to Search for Life in Space.” *Astronomy* (June 2014): 44. Finding evidence of photosynthesis on other worlds.

McKay, C., & Garcia, V. “How to Search for Life on Mars.” *Scientific American* (June 2014): 44–49. Experiments future probes could perform.

Reed, N. “Why We Haven’t Found Another Earth Yet.” *Astronomy* (February 2016): 25. On the search for smaller earthlike planets in their star’s habitable zones, and where we stand.

Shapiro, R. “A Simpler Origin of Life.” *Scientific American* (June 2007): 46. New ideas about what kind of molecules formed first so life could begin.

Simpson, S. “Questioning the Oldest Signs of Life.” *Scientific American* (April 2003): 70. On the difficulty of interpreting biosignatures in rocks and the implications for the search for life on other worlds.

SETI

Chandler, D. "The New Search for Alien Intelligence." *Astronomy* (September 2013): 28. Review of various ways of finding other civilizations out there, not just radio wave searches.

Crawford, I. "Where Are They?" *Scientific American* (July 2000): 38. On the Fermi paradox and its resolutions, and on galactic colonization models.

Folger, T. "Contact: The Day After." *Scientific American* (January 2011): 40–45. Journalist reports on efforts to prepare for ET signals; protocols and plans for interpreting messages; and discussions of active SETI.

Kuhn, J., et al. "How to Find ET with Infrared Light." *Astronomy* (June 2013): 30. On tracking alien civilizations by the heat they put out.

Lubick, N. "An Ear to the Stars." *Scientific American* (November 2002): 42. Profile of SETI researcher Jill Tarter.

Nadis, S. "How Many Civilizations Lurk in the Cosmos?" *Astronomy* (April 2010): 24. New estimates for the terms in the Drake equation.

Shostak, S. "Closing in on E.T." *Sky & Telescope* (November 2010): 22. Nice summary of current and proposed efforts to search for intelligent life out there.

Websites**Astrobiology**

Astrobiology Web: <http://astrobiology.com/> (<http://astrobiology.com/>). A news site with good information and lots of material.

Exploring Life's Origins: <http://exploringorigins.org/index.html> (<http://exploringorigins.org/index.html>). A website for the Exploring Origins Project, part of the multimedia exhibit of the Boston Museum of Science. Explore the origin of life on Earth with an interactive timeline, gain a deeper knowledge of the role of RNA, "build" a cell, and explore links to learn more about astrobiology and other related information.

History of Astrobiology: <https://astrobiology.nasa.gov/about/history-of-astrobiology/> (<https://astrobiology.nasa.gov/about/history-of-astrobiology/>). By Marc Kaufman, on the NASA Astrobiology site.

Life, Here and Beyond: <https://astrobiology.nasa.gov/about/> (<https://astrobiology.nasa.gov/about/>). By Marc Kaufman, on the NASA Astrobiology site.

SETI

Berkeley SETI Research Center: <https://seti.berkeley.edu/> (<https://seti.berkeley.edu/>). The University of California group has received a \$100 million grant from a Russian-American billionaire to begin the Breakthrough: Listen project, a major step forward in the number of stars and number of radio channels being searched.

Fermi Paradox: <https://www.seti.org/fermi-paradox-0> (<https://www.seti.org/fermi-paradox-0>). If the Galaxy is teeming with advanced intelligent life, physicist Fermi asked, why is no one visiting us? This is an introduction; the much longer Wikipedia page on this topic (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fermi_paradox) has more detailed ideas.

Planetary Society: <http://www.planetary.org/explore/projects/seti/> (<http://www.planetary.org/explore/projects/seti/>). This advocacy group for exploration has several pages devoted to the search for life.

Reading list: <http://bit.ly/ufo skeptic> (<http://bit.ly/ufo skeptic>). If you would like to see the perspective of scientists and other skeptical investigators on UFO controversies, check out this reading list.

SETI Institute: <http://www.seti.org> (<http://www.seti.org>). A key organization in the search for life in the

universe; the institute's website is full of information and videos about both astrobiology and SETI.

SETI: <http://www.skyandtelescope.com/tag/seti/> (<http://www.skyandtelescope.com/tag/seti/>). *Sky & Telescope* magazine offers good articles on this topic.

Videos

Astrobiology

Copernicus Complex: Are We Special in the Cosmos?: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERp0AHYRm_Q (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERp0AHYRm_Q). A video of a popular-level talk by Caleb Scharf of Columbia University (1:18:54).

Life at the Edge: Life in Extreme Environments on Earth and the Search for Life in the Universe: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91JQmTn0SF0> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91JQmTn0SF0>). A video of a 2009 nontechnical lecture by Lynn Rothschild of NASA Ames Research Center (1:31:21).

Saturn's Moon Titan: A World with Rivers, Lakes, and Possibly Even Life: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbkTJeHoOKY> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbkTJeHoOKY>). A video of a 2011 talk by Chris McKay of NASA Ames Research Center (1:23:33).

SETI

Allen Telescope Array: The Newest Pitchfork for Exploring the Cosmic Haystack: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqsI1HZCgUM> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqsI1HZCgUM>). A 2013 popular-level lecture by Jill Tarter of the SETI Institute (1:45:55).

Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence: Necessarily a Long-Term Strategy: <http://www.longnow.org/seminars/02004/jul/09/the-search-for-extra-terrestrial-intelligence-necessarily-a-long-term-strategy/> (<http://www.longnow.org/seminars/02004/jul/09/the-search-for-extra-terrestrial-intelligence-necessarily-a-long-term-strategy/>). 2004 talk by Jill Tarter at the Long Now Foundation (1:21:13).

The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Life with New Generation Technology: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1ndk08vZqM> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1ndk08vZqM>). A briefing in 2020 with Jill Tarter, Andrew Siemion, and Victoria Meadows on how scientists are currently searching for life, including intelligent life.

Search for Intelligent Life Among the Stars: New Strategies: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9WxW2ktcKU> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9WxW2ktcKU>). A 2010 nontechnical talk by Seth Shostak of the SETI Institute (1:29:58).

The Breakthrough: Listen Initiative—Our Boldest Effort to Answer our Oldest Question: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQ2sKwwhRgI> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQ2sKwwhRgI>). A talk by Andrew Siemion at Harvard, with some nontechnical and some more technical sections.

Collaborative Group Activities

- A. If one of the rocks from Mars examined by a future mission to the red planet does turn out to have unambiguous signs of ancient life that formed on Mars, what does your group think would be the implications of such a discovery for science and for our view of life elsewhere? Would such a discovery have any long-term effects on your own thinking?
- B. Suppose we receive a message from an intelligent civilization around another star. What does your group think the implications of this discovery would be? How would your own thinking or personal philosophy be affected by such a discovery?
- C. A radio message has been received from a civilization around a star 40 light-years away, which contains (in

pictures) quite a bit of information about the beings that sent the message. The president of the United States has appointed your group a high-level commission to advise whether humanity should answer the message (which was not particularly directed at us, but comes from a beacon that, like a lighthouse, sweeps out a circle in space). How would you advise the president? Does your group agree on your answer or do you also have a minority view to present?

- D. If there is no evidence that UFOs are extraterrestrial visitors, why does your group think that television shows, newspapers, and movies spend so much time and effort publicizing the point of view that UFOs are craft from other worlds? Make a list of reasons. Who stands to gain by exaggerating stories of unknown lights in the sky or simply fabricating stories that alien visitors are already here?
- E. Does your group think scientists should simply ignore all the media publicity about UFOs or should they try to respond? If so, how should they respond? Does everyone in the group agree?
- F. Suppose your group is the team planning to select the most important sights and sounds of Earth to record and put on board the next interstellar spacecraft. What pictures (or videos) and sounds would you include to represent our planet to another civilization?
- G. Let's suppose Earth civilization has decided to broadcast a message announcing our existence to other possible civilizations among the stars. Your group is part of a large task force of scientists, communications specialists, and people from the humanities charged with deciding the form and content of our message. What would you recommend? Make a list of ideas.
- H. Think of examples of contact with aliens you have seen in movies and on TV. Discuss with your group how realistic these have been, given what you have learned in this class. Was the contact in person (through traveling) or using messages? Why do you think Hollywood does so many shows and films that are not based on our scientific understanding of the universe?
- I. Go through the Drake equation with your group and decide on values for each factor in the estimate. (If you disagree on what a factor should be within the group, you can have a "minority report.") Based on the factors, how many intelligent, communicating civilizations do you estimate to be thriving in our Galaxy right now?



Exercises

Review Questions

1. What is the Copernican principle? Make a list of scientific discoveries that confirm it.
2. Where in the solar system (and beyond) have scientists found evidence of organic molecules?
3. Give a short history of the atoms that are now in your little finger, going back to the beginning of the universe.
4. What is a biomarker? Give some possible examples of biomarkers we might look for beyond the solar system.
5. Why are Mars and Europa the top targets for the study of astrobiology?
6. Why is traveling between the stars (by creatures like us) difficult?
7. What are the advantages to using radio waves for communication between civilizations that live around different stars? List as many as you can.
8. What is the "cosmic haystack problem"? List as many of its components as you can think of.
9. What is a habitable zone?

10. Why is the simultaneous detection of methane and oxygen in an atmosphere a good indication of the existence of a biosphere on that planet?
11. What are two characteristic properties of life that distinguish it from nonliving things?
12. What are the three requirements that scientists believe an environment needs to supply life with in order to be considered habitable?
13. Can you name five environmental conditions that, in their extremes, microbial life has been challenged by and has learned to survive on Earth?

Thought Questions

14. Would a human have been possible during the first generation of stars that formed right after the Big Bang? Why or why not?
15. If we do find life on Mars, what might be some ways to check whether it formed separately from Earth life, or whether exchanges of material between the two planets meant that the two forms of life have a common origin?
16. What kind of evidence do you think would convince astronomers that an extraterrestrial spacecraft has landed on Earth?
17. What are some reasons that more advanced civilizations might want to send out messages to other star systems?
18. What are some answers to the Fermi paradox? Can you think of some that are not discussed in this chapter?
19. Why is there so little evidence of Earth's earliest history and therefore the period when life first began on our planet?
20. Why was the development of photosynthesis a major milestone in the evolution of life?
21. Does all life on Earth require sunshine?
22. Why is life unlikely to be found on the surface of Mars today?
23. In this chapter, we identify these characteristic properties of life: life extracts energy from its environment, and has a means of encoding and replicating information in order to make faithful copies of itself. Does this definition fully capture what we think of as "life"? How might our definition be biased by our terrestrial environment?
24. Given that no sunlight can penetrate Europa's ice shell, what would be the type of energy that could make some form of European life possible?
25. Why is Saturn's moon Enceladus such an exciting place to send a mission?
26. In addition to an atmosphere dominated by nitrogen, how else is Saturn's moon Titan similar to Earth?
27. How can a planet's atmosphere affect the width of the habitable zone in its planetary system?
28. Why are we limited to finding life on planets orbiting other stars to situations where the biosphere has created planet-scale changes?

Figuring for Yourself

29. Suppose astronomers discover a radio message from a civilization whose planet orbits a star 35 light-years away. Their message encourages us to send a radio answer, which we decide to do. Suppose our governing bodies take 2 years to decide whether and how to answer. When our answer arrives there, their governing bodies also take two of our years to frame an answer to us. How long after we get their first message can we hope to get their reply to ours? (A question for further thinking: Once communication gets going, should we continue to wait for a reply before we send the next message?)
30. The light a planet receives from the Sun (per square meter of planet surface) decreases with the square of the distance from the Sun. So a planet that is twice as far from the Sun as Earth receives $(1/2)^2 = 0.25$ times (25%) as much light and a planet that is three times as far from the Sun receives $(1/3)^2 = 0.11$ times (11%) as much light. How much light is received by the moons of Jupiter and Saturn (compared to Earth), worlds which orbit 5.2 and 9.5 times farther from the Sun than Earth?
31. Think of our Milky Way Galaxy as a flat disk of diameter 100,000 light-years. Suppose we are one of 1000 civilizations, randomly distributed through the disk, interested in communicating via radio waves. How far away would the nearest such civilization be from us (on average)?