

**SETI and Astrobiology: Contact – A Youth Perspective,**

IAC-02-IAA.9.2.01

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Space Generation Summit Output

11-13 October, 2002

Houston, TX

**53rd International Astronautical Congress  
The World Space Congress - 2002  
10-19 Oct 2002/Houston, Texas**

**SETI AND ASTROBIOLOGY: CONTACT – A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

The search for extraterrestrial life was discussed at the Space Generation Forum (SGF), at UNISPACE-III. SETI and astrobiology have been a main area of activity for students and young professionals in recent years. Ideas, recommendations, and visions for astrobiology and SETI are being further developed at the Space Generation Summit (SGS), an event at World Space Congress (WSC) that will unite international students and young professionals to develop a youth vision and strategy for the peaceful uses of space. SGS, endorsed by the United Nations, will take place from October 11-13th, during which the 200 delegates will discuss ongoing youth space activities, particularly those stemming from the UNISPACE-III/SGF and taken forward by the Space Generation Advisory Council. Delegates will address a variety of topics with the goal of devising new recommendations according to the theme, 'Accelerating Our Pace in Space'. The material presented here and in other technical sessions throughout WSC includes the findings of these discussions.

In this paper, we present the results of the Space Generation Summit relating to the search for extra-terrestrial life.

**Introduction**

One of the oldest questions humankind has been asking is "Are we alone in this universe?" For the first time, we might actually have a chance to find an answer to this question. We now have tools and techniques that allow us to peer through vast distances and time scales, in the hope of finding that elusive, faint glimmer of life that we seek. The impact of such a discovery on the people of our world should by no means be underestimated. It would have profound implications on the way we perceive our place in the universe, and hopefully would lead to a new appreciation of our planet's unique position and the need to preserve it for future generations.

Though this appeals to the scientific population, it has little relevance in the life of the average individual. People sometimes feel alienated from this topic because they believe that they do not have the technical background required to navigate through the issues. Hence we have focused our recommendations around the need to increase the public awareness of the

nature of work being done and further work that needs to be done in order to look for life beyond earth.

**Space Generation Summit**

The Space Generation Summit (SGS) gathered over 200 international students and young professionals to develop a youth vision and strategy for the peaceful uses of space. In conjunction with the World Space Congress, (WSC), this conference, endorsed by the United Nations, took place during October 11-13<sup>th</sup>, 2002. Delegates discussed ongoing youth space activities, particularly those stemming from the UNISPACE-III/SGF and taken forward by the Space Generation Advisory Council. Delegates addressed a variety of topics with the goal of devising new recommendations for the theme, 'Accelerating Our Pace in Space'. The material presented here and in other technical sessions throughout WSC includes some of the findings of these discussions.

### **Vision**

*“To unite and motivate the global community in the effort to seek evidence for extraterrestrial life, by understanding the social and cultural importance of this endeavor.”*

### **Implementation Plan**

The main goal for the Search for Life (SFL) initiative of the Space Generation was to create an International Humanics Implementation Group within the Space Generation Advisory Council (SGAC). The aim of this group will be to research the public awareness, understanding and enthusiasm regarding the SFL initiative and to work upon the means to improve it.

This group will be an official implementation entity within the SGAC and will consist of at least one volunteer from every SGAC region. The group will start as a virtual working group, using e-mail and web-based forums as their main mode of communication. A recruitment plan will then follow, looking for support from the established SFL communities such as the NASA Astrobiology Institute, SETI and other groups and experts in the field. A chairperson will organize regular reports and seminars to discuss progress and development in the early phases before the hardware and marketing strategies are in place. The following three recommendations comprise the initial tasks that the newly formed team will be expected to implement:

1. Create and implement a marketing strategy for “Search for Life Awareness”.
2. Create an international “Search For Life” information warehouse/data archive for public education.
3. Conduct an International Census for “Search for Life” global opinion.

#### **1. International Census for “Search for Life” Global Opinion**

The purpose of an international “Search for Life” census is to gather statistics regarding public opinion as a baseline of current global knowledge of the SFL initiative. The results can be stored in the global SFL database and used to develop the SFL marketing strategy and to make future census comparison studies.

The first and most crucial implementation step for the census is identify an independent reporting agency partner that will:

- ◆ Discuss the logistical details for conducting the census.
- ◆ Decide upon questions for the census.
- ◆ Develop a format to make the resulting data publicly available.
- ◆ Recruit help from as many nations and ethnic backgrounds as possible to extend the scope of the census.

#### **2. Marketing Strategy for “Search for Life” Awareness**

In order to realize the vision of the working group, an effective marketing strategy must be implemented. This strategy will foster public and financial support using various media (e.g. advertisements, documentaries, popular science articles) as well as through the networks established in the creation of the International Humanics Implementation group.

The first step to implementation will be to seek out and consult scientists and marketing experts to formulate a provisional strategy. Some possible elements of the strategy might be:

- ◆ Explaining the importance of SFL research to the general public and to discuss the various benefits with industry.
- ◆ Creating a non-profit support structure, by encouraging public donations through paid membership to the organization, which would carry along some benefits, e.g. provision of regular updates on the current state of research via a magazine.
- ◆ A suggested starting activity for outreach could be to visit universities, schools, and youth organizations, to enroll volunteers who will help in the implementation of this program.
- ◆ Develop relationships with the news & entertainment industry and draw support and endorsement from it.
- ◆ Media education to ensure proper and unbiased reporting of the SFL initiative.

### **3. International “Search for Life” Information Archive**

*“We inspire others to seek information and find their own answers.”*

In order to make the latest developments in the SFL community available to the public, as well as to provide a forum for public opinions, the goal of this recommendation is to establish an impartial and reputable repository of information to disseminate information regarding the research work being done.

To implement this recommendation, we propose to set up an Internet based data warehouse and archive, which will serve as a virtual meeting place between people involved with the SFL and the global community. Information available on the Internet site will include the census results on public opinion regarding the SFL. Further, an online forum will be created where both the public and the scientific community can verbalize their opinions. In this way, changes in public opinions can be monitored and communication between the people professionally involved with the SFL and the public can be facilitated. Through dialogue, we expect a quicker formation of mutual understanding.

Some foreseeable obstacles exist in demands on time, in acquiring funding to support a webmaster, a librarian, and other staff and technical support. However, those problems may be effectively settled by 1) Looking to the SLF marketing strategy to help find avenues of sustaining such a project on a non-profit basis. 2) Locate an IT firm or academic institution with the capability of creating and maintaining this database.

### **Conclusions and Future Work**

Although, public curiosity for the search for extra-terrestrial life is already quite high, it is vital to continue to educate the global community and create a sense of ownership to the potential discovery and its implications on the future of society. Also, in order to create this ownership and continue to accelerate our pace in space it is crucial to unite the SFL scientific community with the public. With this goal in mind, the proposed body will also devise a roadmap of future projects and initiatives.

Regardless of whether our search for life is successful the results of our effort will help us to understand how life evolved here on Earth and help us to continue to define our place in the universe.

### **References**

ISU Design Team, SSP 2002 [Alone – A Discovery Sourcebook for Astrobiology](#). August 2002