E.T. not likely to have human-like intelligence: Astronomer

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Extraterrestrials will probably never 'phone' Earth in a way we'd understand as they're unlikely to have evolved human-like intelligence – but that doesn't mean we should give up the search for life beyond our planet, an ANU expert will argue today.

In an address at The Australian National University, planetary astronomer Dr Charley Lineweaver will review the major patterns of the evolution of life on Earth. He'll make the case that as no other organism on the planet has evolved intelligence closely matching that of humans, it's highly improbable that an extraterrestrial life form would think like we do or have developed technologies similar to ours.

"If human-like intelligence were so useful, we should see many independent examples of it in biology, and we could cite many creatures who had involved on independent continents to inhabit the 'intelligence niche'. But we can't. Human-like intelligence seems to be what its name implies – species specific," says Dr Lineweaver, who works at the Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics at ANU.

Dr Lineweaver will dispute the argument that a general trend towards larger brains in some animals is evidence that there is a natural evolutionary tendency towards being smart, as we human understand the concept.

"The fossil record on Earth strongly suggests that human-like intelligence is not a convergent feature of evolution – something that all

forms of life would attain given enough time. Instead humans are unique, just like every other species. .”

Despite doubting that human-like intelligence could evolve on other planets, Dr Lineweaver believes that humans should continue the search for extraterrestrial life. “I am a strong supporter of SETI [search for extraterrestrial intelligence] – because I may be wrong about how the evidence is best interpreted, and because SETI is relatively cheap science. SETI is the exploration of new parameter space with new instruments – a proven recipe for scientific discovery. However, we do not need to misinterpret the fossil record to justify this inspiring research.”

Source: Australian National University