

NASA disavows its scientist's claim of alien life (Update 3)

March 7 2011, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer



A meteor streaks across the sky against a field of stars during a meteorite shower in 2010. Top NASA scientists said there was no scientific evidence to support a colleague's claim that fossils of alien microbes born in outer space had been found in meteorites on Earth.

The gaps and stringy fibers in these space rocks sure look like bacteria, and a NASA researcher has caused a stir [with claims that they're fossils of alien life](#). But as NASA found 15 years ago, looks can be deceiving.

Top scientists in different disciplines immediately found pitfalls in a newly published examination of three meteorites that went viral on the Internet over the weekend. NASA and its top scientists disavowed the work by noon Monday.

Biologists said just because it looks as though the holes were made by

bacteria doesn't make them fossils of extraterrestrial microbes. The meteorites could be riddled with Earthly contamination. And both astronomers and biologists complained that the study was not truly reviewed by peers.

There are questions about the credentials of the study's author, Richard Hoover. And the work appeared in an online journal that raises eyebrows because even its editor acknowledges it may have to shut down in June and that one reason for publishing the controversial claim was to help find a buyer.

"There's a lot of stuff there, but not a lot of science," said Rosie Redfield, a microbiologist at the University of British Columbia, who publicly dissected the paper over the weekend. "I looked at it and shuddered."

The Associated Press talked to a dozen scientists, and none of them agreed with the findings. There was none of the excitement that surrounded a similar claim that NASA announced with fanfare in 1996 - but was forced to back away from later - that a meteorite from Mars found in Antarctica showed evidence of alien life.

"There has been no one in the scientific community, certainly no one in the meteorite analysis community, that has supported these conclusions," NASA Astrobiology Institute Director Carl Pilcher said Monday of the latest work.

Hoover, of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala., claims he found fossils that look like remnants of bacteria in a handful of meteorites. His research, published online Friday in the Journal of Cosmology, concludes these must have come from outer space. It is based on three specimens of a rare type of meteorite - thought to come from comets - found in France in 1806 and 1864 and Tanzania in 1938.

Hoover's pictures look like microscopic versions of flattened tubes and tangled strings.

Hoover didn't return phone calls or e-mails from the AP.

Rudy Schild, a Harvard astronomer and editor-in-chief of the journal, said the study was reviewed by scientists, but he wouldn't identify them. Schild said the idea was to garner attention and generate debate, which happened after it was first reported over the weekend by FoxNews.com.

"We thought the purpose of the exercise here is having it released and having it discussed," Schild told the AP. He acknowledged the journal's imminent demise was "a factor in play, but there are other factors as well" in the decision to publish Hoover's research.

The year-and-a-half-old journal champions a disputed theory that life started elsewhere in the universe and was seeded on Earth by asteroids and comets.

Schild said criticisms of Hoover's paper "are legitimate" but that he agrees with Hoover's conclusion.

Other scientists say Hoover, who has worked for NASA in solar physics but now bills himself as an astrobiologist, doesn't have the proper expertise. "Anyone can call himself an astrobiologist. That doesn't make it so," said Pilcher, the astrobiology institute director.

And while Hoover's paper in the journal lists him as a "Ph.D.," NASA's solar physics website does not mention a doctorate. A colleague of Hoover's said he acknowledges that he doesn't have the advanced degree. Schild said someone at the journal - he doesn't know who - may have inadvertently listed Hoover with the doctorate title.

Top planetary scientists, including those who study meteorites, are at a conference in Houston this week and this was the talk - albeit mostly in a can-you-believe-this-stuff way, said Harry "Hap" McSween, one of world's foremost experts in meteorites.

"I don't think anybody accepts this idea," McSween said. "Nobody thinks they are extraterrestrial."

McSween has studied one of the meteorites cited - the one that fell to France in 1864. He said it was in "atrocious" condition at a Paris Museum with noticeable contamination. There was a vein in the rock that hadn't been there in old photographs, a sign of creeping moisture. That makes sense because even NASA moon rocks, hermitically stored, have been contaminated with Earthly microbes, he said.

McSween and other scientists said they had hoped the public would ignore reports about the study, but they didn't. It was on the top of Yahoo News much of Monday.

"It looks like it's kind of viral," McSween said. "It's extraterrestrial life, that's why."

For biologist Redfield, it was just another case of a scientist who's not a biologist tinkering in a field he doesn't know.

One of the first rules for biologists is just because one thing looks like another doesn't mean the two things are the same, she said.

"These guys make some stupid announcement completely ignoring all the rules of biology and then get all the publicity," Redfield said.

For McSween and Redfield it's deja vu. McSween criticized the 1996 discovery, which had been announced by then-President Bill Clinton on

the White House south lawn. Over the years, scientist after scientist chipped away at the basis of that Mars meteorite finding and now it's not generally accepted as proof of alien life.

And that study had stronger peer review and more supporting lines of evidence, Redfield and McSween said.

Seth Shostak, an astronomer who searches for intelligent alien life, desperately wanted to believe the reports. But when he read the Hoover study, he ended up disappointed.

"It looks very, very doubtful, which is a shame from several points of view," said Shostak, a senior scientist at the SETI Institute in California. "But that's the way science is. People make claims that often don't hold up. That's the nature of science."

More information:

The Journal of Cosmology paper: <http://bit.ly/eFOppL>

NASA's Astrobiology Institute: <http://astrobiology.nasa.gov/nai/>

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