ABSTRACT

Let’s face it: wherever we go, we will inevitably carry along the little critters that live in and on us. Conventional wisdom has long held that it’s unlikely those critters could survive the space environment, but in 2007 microscopic animals called Tardigrades survived exposure to space and in 2008 Cyanobacteria lived for 548 days outside the International Space Station (ISS). But what about the organisms we might reasonably expect a crewed spacecraft to leak or vent? Do we even know what they are? How long might our tiny hitch-hikers survive in close proximity to a warm spacecraft that periodically leaks/vents water or oxygen—and how might they mutate with long-duration exposure? Unlike the Mars rovers that we cleaned once and sent on their way, crew members will provide a constantly regenerating contaminant source. Are we prepared to certify that we can meet forward contamination protocols as we search for life at new destinations?

This project has four technical objectives:

1. TEST: Develop a test plan to leverage existing equipment (i.e. ISS) to characterize the kinds of organisms we can reasonably expect pressurized, crewed volumes to vent or leak overboard;
2. ANALYSIS: Develop an analysis plan to study those organisms in relevant destination environments, including spacecraft-induced conditions;
3. MODEL: Develop a modeling plan to model organism transport mechanisms in relevant destination environments;
4. SHARE: Develop a plan to disseminate findings and integrate recommendations into exploration requirements & ops.

In short, we propose a system engineering approach to roadmap the necessary experiments, analysis, and modeling up front--rather than try to knit together disparate chunks of data.
into a sensible conclusion after the fact.

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS

To NASA funded missions:
Understanding where and how organisms can escape from pressurized volumes--and whether they survive under destination conditions--will help inform several Advanced Exploration System projects, including Extravehicular Activity Technology, Deep Space Habitat, and Advanced Life Support.

To NASA unfunded & planned missions:
Preventing--or at least understanding--human forward contamination will help engineers meet planetary protection protocols as they design hardware, but will also help the science community understand how close exploration crews can get without compromising science objectives. These insights will help shape architectures and operations for future exploration missions.

To the commercial space industry:
Test, analysis, and modeling derived from this project will be of interest to both government and commercial exploration ventures.

To the nation:
This project will help the U.S. meet international planetary protection agreements.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The focus of this road-mapping effort will be “what can we do now with what we have?” For example, the micro-organisms inside the ISS are well-characterized…but no one has ever swabbed an ISS external vent to find out what (if anything) has managed to get outside. We can swab ISS vents now, without
having to develop new hardware. If we take a sample and find nothing, that’s good news!—it means that our environmental control and life support (ECLS) systems may already meet forward contamination requirements. If we do find organisms outside the ISS, it will be interesting to see how they compare with what we typically find inside. Are they the same? Or have they mutated? What corrective measures can we take to prevent external contamination? Once we know what manages to escape a typical spaceship, we can expose it to various destination environments and see how it’s likely to behave. Then we can go one step further, and test those organisms in a spacecraft-induced environment to understand whether proximity to a warm, venting spaceship makes a difference. That will tell us how far away we must land from a sensitive area to mitigate forward contamination. We can also bring the modeling community into play and overlay destination weather models onto bacterial growth models to estimate how far microbes could be transported by, say, a small dust storm on Mars.

Another opportunity might be to take a sample from an Exploration EVA Suit during development testing and follow similar steps as outlined above: what organisms come out of a suit vent or leak from the suit? How close can EVA crew be to a sensitive site without compromising the science objectives? Data would tell us what modifications might be required to the suit now—early in the development phase—and avoid an expensive redesign later.

This project expects to produce a comprehensive test, analysis and modeling plan.
Characterize Human Forward Contamination Project

U.S. LOCATIONS WORKING ON THIS PROJECT

U.S. States With Work  🌟 Lead Center: Johnson Space Center

• Ames Research Center
• Goddard Space Flight Center
• Jet Propulsion Laboratory

Other Organizations Performing Work:
• SETI Institute (Mountain View, CA)
• The University of Florida

For more information visit techport.nasa.gov

Some NASA technology projects are smaller (for example SBIR/STTR, NIAC and Center Innovation Fund), and will have less content than other, larger projects. Newly created projects may not yet have detailed project information.
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  (http://www.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/files/Fall_2014.pdf)

IMAGE GALLERY

Forward Contamination Project Overview

Tardigrade in Moss, Image Credit & Copyright: Nicole Ottawa & Oliver Meckes / Eye of Science / Science Source Images

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DETAILS FOR TECHNOLOGY 1

Technology Title
Advanced EVA Spacesuits

Technology Description
This technology is categorized as a hardware assembly for wearable applications

Advanced Extravehicular Activity (EVA) spacesuits that can protect the occupant from the environment and protect the environment from the occupant will become more important as humans begin exploring destinations that may have the potential to support life.

Capabilities Provided
The first step is to understand the mechanisms and risks involved in potentially releasing human contamination from our spacesuits. This will inform future suit hardware and operational procedure designs.

Potential Applications
Applications include exploration EVA suits intended for destinations that may support life.

Performance Metrics

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<th>Metric</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ability of System to prevent contamination release</td>
<td>percent</td>
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DETAILS FOR TECHNOLOGY 2

Technology Title
Advanced Life Support

Technology Description
This technology is categorized as a hardware subsystem for manned spaceflight.

The results of this project will help inform advanced life support technology development for exploration missions.

Capabilities Provided
This project will help characterize the types of organisms that are typically vented or leaked from current spacecraft environmental control and life support systems—and provide insight into how to prevent it or mitigate the effects.

Potential Applications
Potential applications for this technology encompass all pressurized crew compartments used at exploration destinations—everything from space suits to habitats or pressurized Mars surface rovers.

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