



The Search For Life On Mars

By Malcolm Walter

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MESA, Arizona—Since the dawn of the space age NASA and other agencies have spent billions of dollars to reconnoiter Mars—assailing it with spacecraft flybys, photo-snapping orbiters and landers nose-diving onto its surface. The odds are good, many scientists say, for the Red Planet being an extraterrestrial address for alien life—good enough to sustain decades’ worth of landing very expensive robots to ping it with radar, zap it with lasers, trundle across its terrain and scoop up its dirt. Yet against all odds (and researchers’ hopes for a watershed discovery), Mars remains a poker-faced world. The possibility of life on Mars is a subject of huge interest in astrobiology due to its proximity and similarities to Earth. To date, no proof has been found of past or present life on Mars. Cumulative evidence shows that during the ancient Noachian time period, the surface environment of Mars had liquid water and may have been habitable for microorganisms. The existence of habitable conditions does not necessarily indicate the presence of life.

Searching for signs. Part of Peter's role in the ExoMars mission is to look at the geological processes on Mars to help decide where missions should land to have the highest possible chance of encountering life. There are a number of factors that scientists look for and consider ingredients for life in space. 'One of the main things we to look for is long-standing liquid water,' Peter says. Life-friendly environments occur in some of the oldest rocks on Mars. They coincide with those earliest days when it was most similar to early conditions here on earth. But research into extreme life here on Earth has opened up discussion about whether Martian life could be more resilient to inhospitable conditions. Is there any evidence of life on Mars? Scientific interest in life on Mars arguably started in earnest in 1543, when Renaissance astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus rocked everyone's world by showing that the planets orbit the Sun. Suddenly, Earth was no longer the center of the universe, and life on our planet lost its privileged position. But losing our special status also opened a huge new possibility: that life could exist on any of the other non-special planets in our solar system. Life, perhaps, existed everywhere. So, scientists changed their tack: They would look back in time, searching for fossils and chemical signatures of past life on Mars. Views of Mars from the NASA's Curiosity Mars rover on April 4, 2016 and a selfie by the Curiosity rover taken January 2015. (Credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/MSSS). Young Mars would have had enough water to cover its entire surface in a liquid layer about 140 metres deep, but it is more likely that the liquid would have pooled to form an ocean occupying almost half of Mars's northern hemisphere, and in some regions reaching depths greater than 1.6 kilometres. (Credit: ESO/M. Kornmesser). Nothing fascinates the imagination quite like the search for extraterrestrial life, even if that life is on the smallish side. It is this fascination that governed the creation of NASA's Curiosity rover. The primary goal of this mission is to determine whether or not Earth

MESA, Arizona—Since the dawn of the space age NASA and other agencies have spent billions of dollars to reconnoiter Mars—assailing it with spacecraft flybys, photo-snapping orbiters and landers nose-diving onto its surface. The odds are good, many scientists say, for the Red Planet being an extraterrestrial address for alien life—good enough to sustain decades’ worth of landing very expensive robots to ping it with radar, zap it with lasers, trundle across its terrain and scoop up its dirt. Yet against all odds (and researchers’ hopes for a watershed discovery), Mars remains a poker-faced world. Though Mars is a cold and dry planet now, Mars would have harbored a large amount of liquid water on the surface early in its history. Mars could have been similar to the early Earth from which life... Klein HP (1979) The Viking mission and the search for life on Mars. *Rev Geophys* 17(7):1655–1662. Klein HP (1992) The Viking biology experiments: epilogue and prologue. The Mars Organic Molecule Analyzer, or MOMA, is a sophisticated suite of technologies that squeezes a lab full of chemistry equipment into a package the size of a toaster. MOMA will travel to Mars aboard ESA’s Rosalind Franklin rover (formerly ExoMars), where it will search for evidence of past or present life. MOMA will not only search for organic molecules, which make up all life on Earth, it will also analyze their structure using its linear ion trap—the first use of this technology on Mars. Doing so will help scientists to determine whether the molecules could be of biological origin.

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