

# Skeptical Briefs

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## Yellowstone and the Absence of ET Visitations

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In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, I wrote a commentary for *Tampa Bay Skeptics Report* (Winter 2001–2002) titled “Terrorism and the Absence of ET Visitations,” about why—UFO reports to the contrary—Earth has apparently never been visited by space-faring species from else-

where in our galaxy. To the list including comet/meteor/asteroid impact, I suggested that “even before advanced civilizations have an opportunity to be offed like the dinosaurs, they manage to off themselves,” and that, therefore, “*Star Trek* will forever remain science fiction.”

I hereby apologize for my ignorance at the time. *Not* because I have since been persuaded that we have been so visited. And *not* because I am now more optimistic about the ultimate fate of intelligent life in the universe. Quite the contrary.

Only recently did I learn that even if we were able to protect against catastrophic impacts, weapons, and disease, civilization on this planet is still doomed, and presumably the same is true throughout the universe. The culprit? In our case, Yellowstone National Park. On the planet Zortan, their analogous tourist attraction might be the Gardens of Zuprada.

Like almost everyone else, I had no idea

that Yellowstone, like a handful of similar wonders of beauty across the globe, is, in essence, a doomsday machine. Not until I recently saw a one-hour 1999 BBC television documentary (transcript available on the Web via Google search for the title “Supervolcanoes”) did I have any inkling that destructive forces of such magnitude even existed. Nor did the scientists interviewed for that program, until their relatively recent discoveries compelled them to realize that, as one says at the show’s conclusion, “It’s really not a question of *if* it’ll go off, it’s a question of *when*.” And Yellowstone is already about 40,000 years overdue to “go off”—again.

Exactly what am I talking about? Yellowstone, it turns out, is but the surface feature of a “supervolcano.” Lurking five miles underground is an enormous chamber of gas-containing magma measuring about 40–50x20x10 kilometers and growing relentlessly. But Yellowstone’s magma has no

escape route leading to the surface, no “cone” like a conventional volcano from which to occasionally vent its unimaginable pressure. When Yellowstone “goes off” again, it will do so only after the pressure has built to such an extent—perhaps 10,000 times that of the catastrophic Mount St. Helens blast—that even the five miles of earth above the magma will no longer be sufficient to hold back the belch that will swallow civilization. The north end of the park has been pushed upward enough

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## Free Energy Update

**Phactum (Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking), Sep/Oct 2004:** Eric Krieg, an independent computer consultant and president of PhACT, gives us the latest news from the fringe-science field of “free energy” machines. From inventors who can invent only hype to machines that never pass muster, to conspiracy theories about the “Men in Black,” Krieg has seen it all. “For the past eight years, I have been following claims of free energy as the most prominent skeptic of it on the Internet,” he writes. “I’ve seen a lot of new things from these people . . . but certainly not a working device.”

Free energy devotees believe that the laws of physics can be thwarted, and that people have built machines that will provide more energy than they consume. Such machines include electric cars that never lose power, four-story-high perpetual motion machines, devices that can extract hydrogen from water, and cars that can get 100 miles to the gallon.

Unfortunately, none of these machines have been proven to work—and to complicate things, many of the people endorsing such products are reluctant to submit to testing. As Krieg explains, “I’ve noticed many paranormal promoters have a fervor for making bold claims matched only by their backpedaling skills in avoiding a fair demonstration.”

Many members of the free energy community also believe in UFOs and various conspiracy theories, including that our government is sending out “Men in Black” assassins to silence free energy researchers—although such people tend to die from mundane causes, such as “suicide, substance abuse, dramatic accidents or from just being really, really old.”

Though Krieg thinks that “skeptics in this and every other paranormal field are out-numbered about ten to one by dopey or corrupt rumor traffickers,” he’s not giving up. He likens free energy claims to famous Hollywood monsters: “(W)e skeptics can never hope to really bury demons like these absurd stories, but along the way, we can often save individuals from wasting excessive amounts of time and money.”

## I Was a Token Darwinist

**NSMR Reports (New Mexicans for Science and Reason), October 2004:** In his article, originally posted on *The Panda’s Thumb* Web site, Dave Thomas recounts his experiences from the recent “Darwin, Design and Democracy V” conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He got to present the opposing view (his “Top Ten Myths of Intelligent Design”) to a crowd of Intelligent Design experts, such as Michael Behe and William Dembski, and indulged in some verbal sparring with ID supporters.

“Neither Dembski nor Behe spoke to me after my talk, but they did pick up my handouts with the references for the key papers I cited,” Thomas writes. “Whether or not they decide to correct their disproved hypotheses remains to be seen. From past experience, I’ll not be holding my breath.”

“There were some memorable schizophrenic moments, though,” Thomas muses. “During my talks, I was repeatedly asked ‘What will it take to stop calling us (IDers) creationists?’ Outside, however, the Creation Research Society sold books, including the ID favorite *Of Pandas and People*. CDs of creationist symposia, and copies of creationist books like Walter ReMine’s *The Biotic Message* were also available. Perhaps these IDers have been denying they’re creationists so long that they’ve lost the ability to parse what their eyes are seeing.”

## Feng Shui at USF

**Tampa Bay Skeptics Report (Tampa Bay Skeptics), Fall 2004:** Retired science professor (and intrepid skeptic) Jack Robinson found that the University of South Florida at Tampa was offering a course in Feng Shui, the ancient Chinese art of geomancy, as part of its “Learning in Retirement” program. Robinson signed up for the course so he “could play devil’s advocate as a student.”

“My purpose was not to try to change the beliefs of the teacher and the guest speakers, but to show my fellow students that they should be skeptical about the ideas presented,” Robinson explains. “I was neither disruptive nor disrespectful, knowing that would only irritate and turn off the people I wished to help. For the most part, I just asked skeptical questions at appropriate

times, to try to stimulate the students into thinking critically.”

Robinson reports that most of the material presented in the course was thoroughly credulous, making use of “vague terms of chi and energy flow, or magnetic influences, when there are other obvious reasons, for example, why the growth of trees is stunted in a high, dry climate.” He did score some modest victories, though, such as convincing the instructor to show a segment from Penn & Teller’s *Bullshit!* and providing copies of an *LA Times* article, both critical of feng shui. □

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recently to partially submerge trees along the lake’s south shoreline that were sitting on dry land only a few years ago.

As the documentary describes, in a story of discovery every bit as exquisite as Louis Alvarez’s work on the Yucatán impact of 65 million years ago that ended the reign of the dinosaurs, Yellowstone has a tendency to “go off” approximately every 600,000 years. And, unfortunately, it has been about 640,000 years since its last apocalyptic eruption, which rendered Earth’s atmosphere awash in sulfuric acid and shards of poisonous glass-dust, global temperatures in the “nuclear winter” range, and North America under about two meters of ash.

The most recent “supervolcano” known to have exploded is located in Sumatra. When it last blew about 74,000 years ago, forming Lake Toba, it is believed to have killed all but about 5–10,000 humans, based upon studies of mitochondrial DNA.

The good news is, such an event hasn’t happened in our lifetimes, and the odds are that generations X, Y, and Z will luck out, as might the next several, or even several hundred, passes through the alphabet. But, as inevitably as the sun rises every morning, Yellowstone—and the handful of other recently discovered “supervolcanoes”—blow their tops at relatively regular intervals. And unlike catastrophic impacts, weapons, and disease, not a damn thing can be done, even theoretically, to stop them. Not on planet Earth, anyway. And, I suspect, not on planet Zortan. □

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