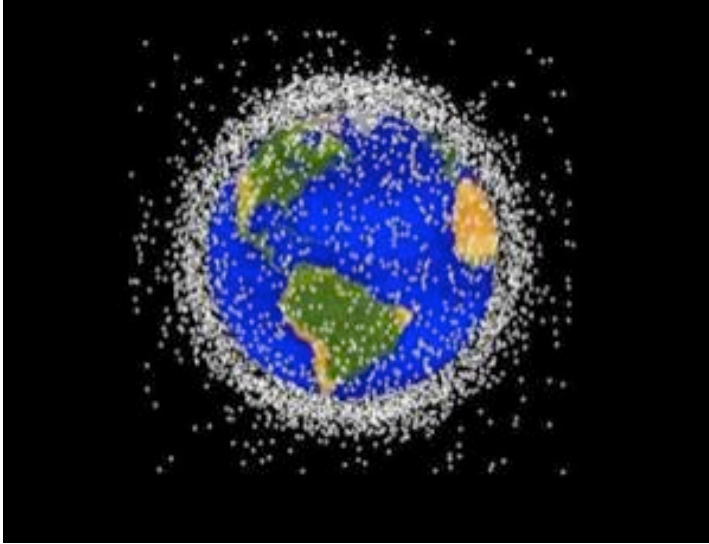


Outer Space



*Seen from space, a
gray ring of junk orbits
the Earth*

Outer space has become a global commons. Around a thousand operational satellites, launched from more than forty countries, are now orbiting around the earth, and another eight dozen objects are launched

into space each year. Space is also an increasingly busy and dangerous place. Today's satellites are tomorrow's space debris. About 300 satellites in orbit are no longer in use. More than 300,000 pieces of space junk travel aimlessly, risking collision with satellites in use, most recently in February last year, when a U.S. communication satellite collided with a nonfunctional Russian military satellite and generated a large amount of debris flying at high speeds.

Clearly, we need rules of the road. Here on earth, we enjoy the benefits of space every day. Communication satellites enable broadcasting, telephone and television signals, provide internet linkages, and support financial transactions. When a communication satellite malfunctioned in 1998, thirty million pagers went silent, credit cards failed and some radio and television networks went off the air. Satellites provide data about the weather and the earth's ecosystems. They are used to verify compliance with treaties and help us provide relief during disasters, mapping places otherwise inaccessible to humans. After the devastating cyclone in Myanmar in 2008, for example, satellites restored vital communication links and provided key images of the damage. Since 1994, the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) has developed standards that although not legally binding are of obvious interest to all countries. The United Nations is especially wary of military uses of outer space. Under a globally binding UN 1967 treaty, ratified by most countries and the nuclear powers nations have

Outer Space

agreed not to place nuclear weapons in space. But the treaty does not prohibit nuclear warheads on missiles launched from the ground into space, or using force against a country's satellites or other space assets. Clearly more agreements are needed.

The United States has opposed multilateral legal agreements covering outer space. In fact, the Bush administration spoke of achieving "total space dominance." The Obama administration is committed to a workable ban on weapons in space and is currently reevaluating U.S. space policy. Meanwhile, the space capabilities of other countries are growing fast. China, for example, showed that it can destroy a target in space when it destroyed its own defunct weather satellite in 2007. Outer space can bring great benefits to mankind, but only if countries work together to avoid violence and chaos.

Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld. International Humanist Ethical Union and the National Ethical Service of the American Ethical Union representative to the UN and Temma Ehrenfeld.