Asteroid heading to Earth? Please, just don't ask...

By David Derbyshire, Science Correspondent, in Denver

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Forget Bruce Willis, daring space missions and Hollywood high explosives. If a real life Armageddon-style asteroid were discovered on a deadly collision course with the Earth politicians would be better off doing nothing and telling no one, scientists heard yesterday.

According to Geoffrey Sommer, of the Rand Corporation, an American think tank, advance warning of the end of the world would bring chaos to the streets, rioting in the shopping malls and send the economy spiralling out of control.

Rather than spread "unnecessary" panic, politicians might be wise to keep it dark, he said. There are still no plans for civil defence in the event of the sudden discovery of a doomsday asteroid and no studies of how it could be deflected out of harm's way, he told the association.

Of the 2,000 or so asteroids orbiting the sun close to the Earth, around 1,100 are thought to be at least two thirds of a mile long - big enough to pose a serious threat to mankind.

Over the last few years, the international collaboration of asteroid watching scientists, Spaceguard, has tracked 650 possible threats. So far it has found none that is on target to hit the Earth within the next couple of hundred years.

However, if an asteroid big enough to wipe out mankind was found to be on collision course - and if nothing could be done - governments should keep quiet, Mr Sommer said.

"If you can't do anything about a warning, then there is no point in issuing a warning at all," he said. "If an extinction type impact is inevitable, then ignorance for the populace is bliss."

But Dr Lee Clarke, a sociologist at Rutgers University, New Jersey, said the lesson from history was that people did not panic when facing a crisis. "We have five decades of research on all kinds of disasters,

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earthquakes, tornadoes, plane crashes and so on, and people rarely lose control," he said.

"If I were to discover that a monster rock was coming towards us and it could be an extinction event, common sense tells me that I want to know now. It's not up to any bureaucrat or policy maker to keep that from me. I might want to make peace with my god."

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