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# Asteroid warnings debated

## Better not to know doomsday is near?

By **Diedtra Henderson**

Denver Post Science Writer

**Friday, February 14, 2003** - The same type of monster asteroid that struck Earth 65 million years ago, extinguishing the dinosaurs, lurks in the dark recesses of space right now.

The good news is that researchers have a clear idea where most of those disaster-makers orbit and none is poised to end life as we know it anytime soon.

But not everyone's convinced that warnings of an extinction-level asteroid strike should become common knowledge.

Take Geoffrey Sommer, a policy analyst at the Rand Corp. in Santa Monica, Calif.

Sommer suggested to fellow American Association for the Advancement of Science panelists that it might do more harm than good to warn the public about a massive asteroid strike if there is so little warning that the masses can't be evacuated.

Lee Clarke, a Rutgers University sociology professor who is an internationally known expert in disasters, took the bait.

"Common sense tells me I want to know. And it's not up to him ... to keep that from me. I just want to get my affairs in order," he said, echoing the thoughts of death-row inmates, Jews imprisoned during the Holocaust and terminal-cancer patients he's researched for a book in progress. "You want to make peace with your God."

It's not just a matter of last-minute cleansing of the soul, added a Harvard risk communications specialist. That

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level of deceit would instantly evaporate the public's trust in government.

"If you hide something from people that is about whether they'll live or die, they're not going to trust you. It would be a serious mistake," said David Ropeik of Harvard's Center for Risk Analysis.

Much has changed in the decade since a NASA scientist was among those to highlight the danger of so-called Near Earth Objects, earning the nickname "Dr. Doom." Then, fewer people worked on understanding the hazard, said David Morrison, a scientist at NASA Ames Research Center.

Now, the Air Force and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration have turned telescopes to the task, pulling about 60 percent of the hazardous asteroids out of hiding through sky surveys shot every 20 minutes. The survey telescopes and powerful computers that analyze the pictures find an asteroid a day that's about a mile wide, the most worrisome size.

The other 40 percent of uncharted Near Earth Objects are also worrisome, and comets bring their own level of panic, since they cluster on the fringe of the solar system and wouldn't be spotted until one sped past Jupiter, giving just a few months to a year of warning.

In addition, no civil-defense plans exist to handle an unexpected impact. No international agreements are in place to decide how to respond to the threat of an asteroid strike, and current talks exclude developing nations.

While the disaster of an asteroid strike would eclipse the tragedy of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, scientists are clear they don't want a warning system that follows the lead of homeland security. Raising the potential of a terrorist attack this week sent Americans scouring hardware-store shelves for plastic and duct tape.

"The lesson is this: Upping the warning level to orange and telling people to go buy plastic is ill advised," Clarke said. "Real meaningful warnings? Yeah, we

ought to have that kind of thing."

The guys who came up with the Richter scale had it right, added a Colorado researcher, since they debated their way to a simple and elegant method of using magnitude numbers to translate the power unleashed by an earthquake.

Creating a warning scale for a possible asteroid strike would be as difficult and challenging, said Clark Chapman, a planetary scientist at the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder. The seismologists made "a very conscientious effort" to create a warning scale the public could understand.

Nearly 2,000 of the near-Earth thugs orbit in space. As many as half could strike Earth at some point.

Scientists issued a few asteroid- strike warnings in recent years that the media leaped upon quickly, before the asteroids' true orbits were confirmed. Those missteps shouldn't matter, they said.

"A little bit of trust has been lost," said Harvard's Ropeik. "There's plenty of time to calm people down and explain how science figures this out."

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