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February 15 2003

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Breaking news  
Britain  
**World**  
Business  
Sport  
Your Money  
Comment  
Sports Book  
Travel  
Shopping  
Classifieds  
Law  
Games  
Crossword  
Motoring  
Property  
Student  
Sunday Times

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Sunday  
Monday  
Tuesday  
Wednesday  
Thursday  
Friday  
Today

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Books  
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Education  
Fast Times  
Film  
Finest  
First night  
Food and Drink  
From the Archive  
Good University Guide  
Health  
Online Specials  
Play  
Promotions  
Style Guide  
Subscription  
Supplements

February 15, 2003

## 'Don't tell public of doomsday asteroid'

By Mark Henderson in Denver

THE public should not be told if scientists detect a huge asteroid on a collision course with Earth that cannot be deflected, a disaster expert said.

Geoff Sommer, of the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California, said that governments would be wrong to warn of an impending impact that could destroy all life if there was no realistic prospect of stopping it. The panic, misery and disruption that such a warning would cause would not be worthwhile, he told the association.

It would be better for the fewest people to know that mankind was about to become extinct in a fashion similar to the dinosaurs. Mr Sommer said: "It makes sense to warn if there's something you can do but if you can't intercept it, if you can't move people out of its way, it makes sense not to occasion further social costs."

His view was strongly disputed by Lee Clarke, Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University, who said people had a right to be told about the impending end of the world. "If we see a monster event coming, an extinction event, common sense would tell me I want to know and that it's not up to him, or up to some high-level bureaucracy, to decide whether I know or not," he said.

"The reaction might not be what most people expect. Look at people on death row, people in prison camps during the Holocaust, people with terminal cancer," he said. "You might want to make peace with your God, for example."

The world would have two main options if astronomers detected a large asteroid or comet on a collision course, scientists said. If the object were less than a kilometre in diameter, it should be possible to calculate the precise spot it would hit and evacuate the area.

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Impact by a body ten times larger, such as the asteroid generally thought to have wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, would give the human race little chance of surviving. Mankind would have to try to deflect it or blow it up.



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