

Cultural Aspects Of Astrobiology

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NASA's Astrobiology Roadmap, developed in 1998 by an interdisciplinary team of more than 150 individuals, recognizes ten science goals, 17 more specific science objectives, and four broad principles for the Astrobiology Program. Among the four operating principles, which emphasize multidisciplinary, planetary stewardship and public outreach, is one that also recognizes broad societal interest for the implications of astrobiology, especially its extraterrestrial life component.

Although several meetings have been convened in the past decade to discuss the implications of extraterrestrial intelligence, including NASA's own CASETI workshops in 1991-1992, none have surveyed the broader implications of astrobiology as now defined at NASA. In this paper we survey these societal questions raised by astrobiology, and then focus on those related to extraterrestrial life, and in particular how they might differ from SETI concerns already discussed.

As we enter the new millennium, the necessity for interdisciplinary studies is increasingly recognized in academia, industry and government. Astrobiology provides an unprecedented opportunity to encourage the unity of knowledge, as recently proposed in E. O. Wilson's book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. It is incumbent on scientists to support research on the implications of their work, in particular large government-funded scientific projects. The deep insights such study may yield has been amply demonstrated by the Human Genome Project, among others.