

Astrobiology News September 2019: Helping Life on Earth from Your Home

You may wonder what on Earth (pun intended) the title of this month's news has to do with astrobiology! In *Astrotheology Science and Theology Meet Extraterrestrial Life*, planetary scientist Christopher McKay adopts the following astroethical premise: "The long-term goal for astrobiology is the enhancement of the richness and diversity of life in the universe."¹ So here's the connection - Earth is presently the only *known* habitat of life in the universe, and human beings are the sole species able to act on the premise of enhancing the diversity – and quality – of life on our planet.

Now to the second part of the title – helping from home. The motto of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is "God's work. Our hands." This phrase is a mandate to lend a helping hand to others and care for creation in whatever way you are able; whether that means preparing meals for invalids, volunteering at animal shelters, building homes for the homeless, or traveling to provide onsite disaster relief. While the words employed may be different, I know that diverse communities of faith share similar values and express similar sentiments. What the aforementioned activities require, though, are mobility and the wherewithal to participate in activities that may require efforts beyond the physical means or financial circumstances of many who want to be of service.

What if there was a way to assist disaster relief efforts, help the environment and endangered species, or contribute to medical research (No, you don't need to be a doctor!), without having to leave your house? There is! I've written about *Zooniverse* before, but you may not be aware of the breadth of diversity of online projects to which you can contribute. As I write this, there is a short-term *Zooniverse* effort to help those affected by Hurricane Dorian, which requires nothing more than an internet connection and the willingness to inspect before and after satellite images. Volunteer inspections will inform relief efforts on the ground.²

At the present time, there are more projects in the humanities than in the space sciences, and about four times as many projects classified as

`biology' or `nature'. Many of these are contributing to critical research on ecology and the environment. I would be very surprised if anyone *couldn't* find a project of interest in *Zooniverse* – at the present time, there are 112 options!³ I encourage everyone to check out this short video⁴ and a great article about *Zooniverse* in the October 2018 issue of *Astronomy Magazine*,⁵ although some of the numbers reported in the latter (such as participants and publications) have significantly increased over the past year.

Stay tuned for more information on how you might use *Zooniverse* in group programs, such as adult education or youth classes, and how your community might even build its own crowd-sourced project!

Until next month,

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¹ Christopher McKay, “Astroethics and the Terraforming of Mars,” in *Astrotheology: Science and Theology Meet Extraterrestrial Life*, ed. Ted Peters (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2018): 381.

² <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/mrniaboc/planetary-response-network-hurricane-dorian>

³ <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects>

⁴ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1K8lDcXYp8R0BVKXZJuyJrbujphsF7t6J/view?usp=sharing>

⁵ <http://www.astronomy.com/magazine/2018/09/a-citizen-science-success-story>