

DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

Allen Telescope Disarray

The Allen Telescope Array was to have been the world's greatest radio telescope, a field of 6-meter parabolic dishes stretching across the California countryside, eventually growing to 350 in number, tasked with full-time SETI observations. Thus, the dismay of the scientific community was palpable, when it was announced in April of 2011 that the whole facility was being temporarily put into cold storage.

Not that I was particularly surprised at this turn of events. The ATA was a joint initiative of two fine organizations. One player is the nonprofit SETI Institute (a California alliance of professional astronomers, engineers, physicists, and astrobiologists, not to be confused with

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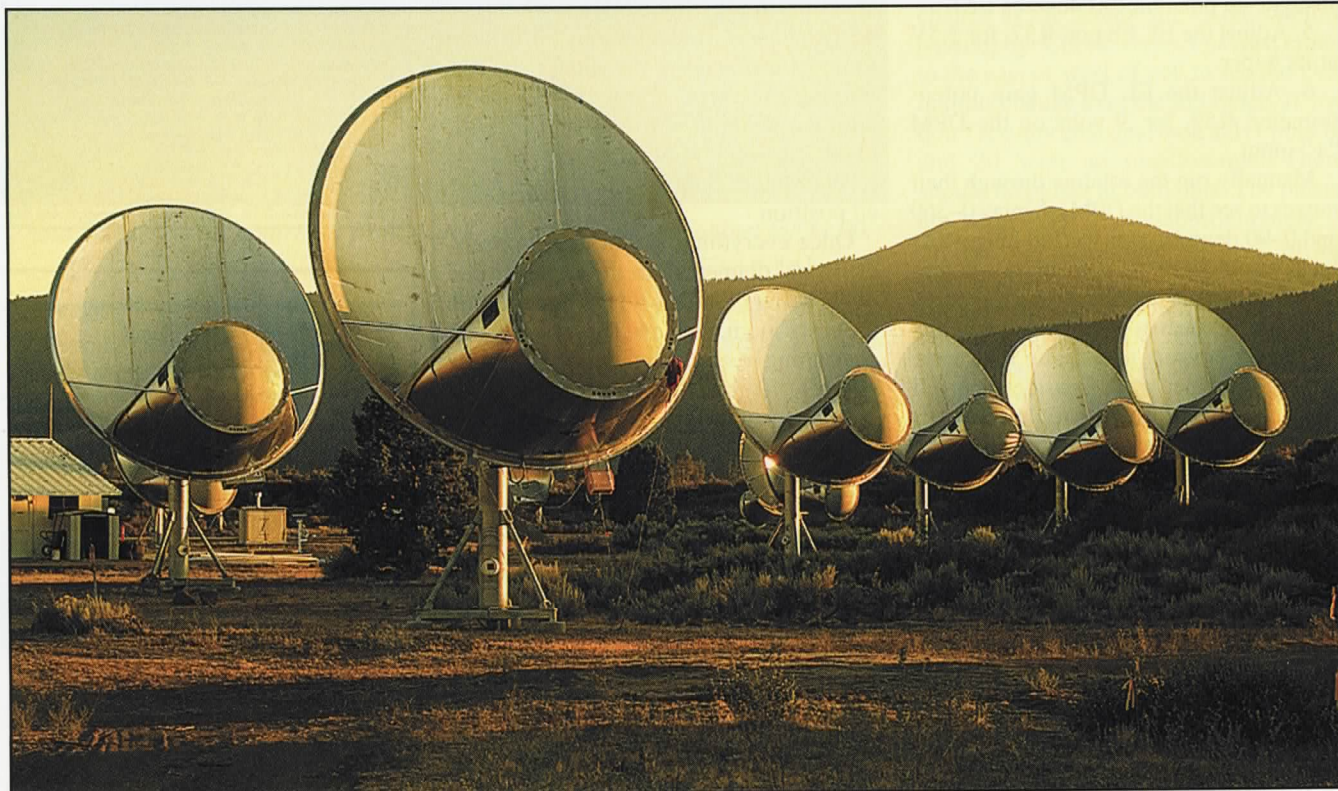
The SETI League, our own global alliance of radio amateurs and experimenters). They partnered with the Radio Astronomy Laboratory at the University of California, Berkeley (my own alma mater, and arguably the world's premiere institution of higher learning).

The project had received significant and generous funding from industry icons such as Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, and Nathan Myhrvold, the Princeton astrophysicist turned intellectual-property entrepreneur. It had received somewhat more modest funding from a host of enthusiastic donors, including The SETI League's own president, Richard Factor, WA2IKL. With 42 antennas up and running, the facility was already doing credible science . . . when the money ran out.

The array had set back its donors on the order of \$50 million, which works out to

in excess of a megabuck per antenna (just a bit pricey for an oversized satellite dish). Still, one must consider that most of that sum was spent not on concrete and steel, but rather on research and development—plus, the not inconsiderable cost of operations. Also, eventual expansion of the array to its planned 350 elements notwithstanding, it was those operating costs (or rather, the lack thereof) that ultimately pushed the project into its present hiatus.

The SETI League can sympathize. A decade ago, we launched our own very modest effort at combining satellite dishes into a research-grade telescope. The Very Small Array (VSA) was never completed, although we did get eight small dishes up and running, and proof-of-concept hardware and software tested, before we, too, ran out of money. Our budget was less than stellar; the project consumed about 10 thousand of your generously



The Allen Telescope Array in Hat Creek, California sits idle, while the SETI Institute and University of California seek financial support to resume its scientific mission. (SETI Institute photo)

donated dollars. It wasn't nearly enough. Thus, we also had to put our array on hiatus, but not before I managed to score a patent on the underlying technology. I assigned that patent to The SETI League, in hopes that commercializing it might generate revenues sufficient to support our humble scientific efforts. Unfortunately, the "dot-com" bubble burst before anyone beat a path to our door.

To turn their own array back on, our California colleagues need to raise some 5-million dollars. I just checked my wallet, and I don't have quite that much cash to spare. As for the VSA, the SETI League would need another \$20k to finish the project. That sum, too, exceeds the contents of my wallet—by several orders of magnitude.

Thus, I, the author of this column, am asking you to check your own wallet. Have you an extra 5 megabucks to fund

a couple of years of ATA operation? If so, I encourage you to step forward and help restart SETI's finest observational instrument. Or do you maybe have a couple of kilobucks to throw into the Very Small Array? If so, please send it along to The SETI League, and I'll be happy to resume work on that suspended project.

You say neither project is within your financial reach? I understand completely, as I am in the same situation. If possible, I am asking you to dig not quite so deeply. A \$50 membership in The SETI League (and an equivalent contribution to the SETI Institute's Team SETI) will be a worthy show of support. Besides, if a few thousand others will follow your lead, both organizations (and their respective technology projects) will find themselves back on the road toward SETI success.

73, Paul, N6TX



The SETI League's VSA (Very Small Array) sits behind the author's home in rural central Pennsylvania, awaiting the funds to complete it. (N6TX photo)

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