

37th SYMPOSIUM ON THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE (SETI) – The  
 Next Steps (A4.)  
 SETI II - Interdisciplinary Aspects of SETI (2.)

Author: Prof. Albert Harrison

University of California, Davis, Davis, California USA, United States, aaharrison@ucdavis.edu

PLANNING FOR CONTACT: FANTASY DOCUMENTS OR GUIDELINES FOR ACTION?

**Abstract**

A fantasy document, as defined by the sociologist Lee Clarke, contains plans that have been developed in the absence of a firm knowledge base. Fantasy documents arise when an “affinity” or illusory similarity between two events makes it possible to develop dubious but reassuring plans of action. To illustrate, Clarke notes that our experience with hurricanes, which is considerable, has been used to plan for nuclear war, a catastrophe that we have yet to experience. The superficial similarities between the two events – hurricanes and nuclear attacks – at once creates the illusion that the plan is based on experience and diverts attention from the tremendous differences between the two. Nonetheless, endorsed by experts and released by the government, the plan shows that the leadership is “doing something” to protect people from nuclear catastrophe. Planning for encounters with forms of intelligence whose psychology and culture are not known to us is another area where efforts must proceed in the absence of a firm knowledge base. Over the years researchers have looked to historical analogues (such as the dissemination of scientific knowledge across cultures, the landing of Europeans in the New World, and Orson Welles’s invasion from Mars broadcast) for inspiration. Are these useful prototypes for understanding human response to extraterrestrial life, or mere affinities that give the illusion of relevance? The choice of analogues, linking specific analogues to specific detection scenarios, explicit recognition of differences between analogues and focal events, and carefully qualified recommendations reduce the chances of developing fantasy documents. In addition to the use of analogues, futurist planning strategies include trend analysis, mathematical modeling, and scenario development. Futurists argue that limited or imperfect information is better than no information, but this may not be the case if it breeds overconfidence, restricts the search for and evaluation of new information, or encourages the translation of weak findings into strong policies. Planning is a useful intellectual exercise that moves us beyond fatalism and helplessness, and under the right conditions, contributes to effective action. Because of continuous change in terrestrial cultures, planning for contact must be ongoing.