

RUNNING OUT OF SPACE

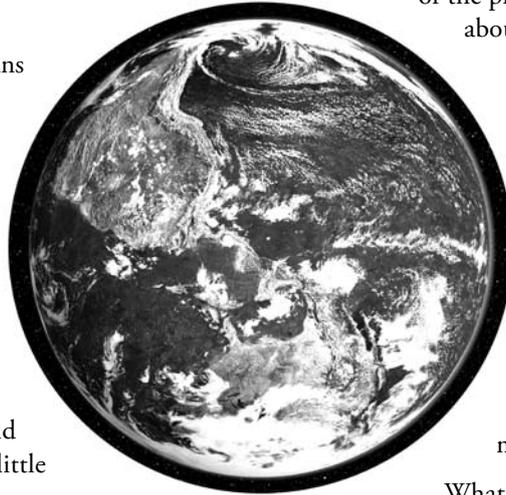
One afternoon in 1969, some chaps were filmed hopping about in a dusty, sunlit place rumoured (well, who really knows?) to be the Moon, having just won The Space Race. Since then much more than a trillion dollars of humanity's hard-earned cash has been spent on space exploration, benefitting humanity with such vital equipment as non-stick saucepans. After the Russians lost interest in going to the Moon, the scramble for World Domination shrank to a quest for a better egg-scrambling device.

Since the Moon lost its sparkle, plans for crewed missions to Mars have taken over. There have been eight announcements since the Sixties, each with increasingly distant dates; the latest being 2030. In April, having just awarded NASA \$19 billion for the year ahead, Trump phoned the International Space Station and was surprised to hear the date: "Well, we want to try and do it during my first term, or at worst during my second term, so we'll have to speed that up a little bit, OK?", he blurted.

But in space policy circles, according to *New Scientist*, "the fact that NASA's Mars plans are vague and unlikely to come off is an open secret".¹ Politicians have a term for this sort of thing – "ladders to the Moon", meaning any daft proposal that will keep the hoi polloi happy. So governments carry on playing the Space Game, much as they go after Olympic medals and

war trophies and Tallest Buildings. It's a sop to Jingoism and, more recently, a grand distraction from their incompetence in the face of emerging climate catastrophe.

In 2014, Obama's administration allotted roughly 0.6 percent of the space exploration budget to climate mitigation. Now Trump has forbidden any federal employee to even mention climate change, so the chances of him putting the health of the planet before his personal glamour are just about zero.



The latest space proposal, "Breakthrough Starshot" is for a 1.5 ton craft with 50 kilometre-wide sails all made from superconducting metals to reach Trappist1, a red dwarf star, in only 12,000 years' time and seed it with Earth-life.² But Outer Space will be there for all eternity; so let's leave it for future generations (if there are any) to explore. Or maybe they'll just choose to harvest the megatons of scrap metal we've already put up there.

What's the hurry? If we can afford trips to Mars, we can surely afford to fix our own planet first. NASA's \$19 billion per annum, plus all the other nations' space billions, could be doing something useful instead, like keeping the people who have to pay for this lunacy alive and well on a habitable planet – this one.

GB

*Good planets are hard to find,
so why trash this one?*

1. Crane, Leah *Failure to Launch* *New Scientist* 26.8.2017 p20.
2. *A Plan to Seed Life Throughout the Cosmos*. Ibid, 18.11.2017 p10

