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PROTECTING THE SPACE ENVIRONMENT: WHO DECIDES?

Abstract

Commercial space users are aware of the policy regime affecting their individual space application and, with the introduction of orbital debris mitigation guidelines, continue to see it evolve. As applications expand beyond Earth orbit, the policy and regulatory regime will follow suit, particularly with respect to further protection of the space environment. The question is: will commercial space operators and developers be sufficiently engaged with the process to make a useful contribution to that regime?

The recent formation of an IAA Study Group on “Protecting the Environment of Celestial Bodies (PECB)” represents a significant step towards international recognition of the issues surrounding protection of the space environment. It is, nevertheless, only a relatively small step, and there is much work yet to be done.

One aspect of this work, the subject of the current paper, is the question of who – which organisation or forum – will be tasked with the formulation of guidelines and policies for protecting the space environment. Noting the space community’s experience with the Earth orbital debris issue and with bio-contamination aspects of ‘planetary protection’, the paper seeks to identify a practical model for such a forum.

A number of existing academic bodies have already been identified as possibilities, but because of the many disparate disciplines that need to be involved in such wide-ranging discussions, the majority of the initial investigations will have to be addressed by specialist sub-groups that report to the main body.

Crucially, it will be necessary to involve the commercial sector - including both established industries and the growing community of space entrepreneurs - to ensure that their views are taken into account and that any policies are as inclusive and equitable as possible.

Recognising the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach, this paper argues that the way to create a consensus for protecting the space environment is to ensure that all interested parties develop a sense of ‘ownership’. Imposing an environmental protection policy without prior consultation is unlikely to be successful. It is time for the commercial sector to engage with the policy process and have their say.