

39th SYMPOSIUM ON THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE (SETI) – The
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THE HISTORY OF CONTACT ON EARTH: DATA, MYTHS, MISCONCEPTIONS

Abstract

Discussions of the potential risks and benefits of inter-specific contact with ETI frequently invoke the history of inter-cultural contacts on Earth. Earth's cultural history is thus a potent contributor to debates concerning the "public policy" aspects of SETI (e.g. active SETI, and post-detection protocols), and this phenomenon invites examination. Accordingly, this paper will first address the nature of historical episodes of contact on Earth, and their use as analogs for interstellar contact: are these Earth examples merely illustrations, suitable only for rhetorical emphasis, or could they actually be a source of useful data about human behavior in contact scenarios? Then, an analysis of common myths and misconceptions in prominent "contact examples" will be offered. What really happened, for example, when the Aztec met the Spanish? And what does this mean for our expectations of contact between worlds?