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SCIENCE

7:53 AM
 Fri July 19, 2013

Earth #Photobombed Saturn Last Time. Today, it's a #Selfie.

By Ellis Robinson

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Credit Cassini space-probe / NASA

Enlarge image

Earth-moon system as photographed by NASA spacecraft Cassini. "The Day Earth Smiled" was taken from approximately 900 million miles away on July 19, 2013.

A billion miles from the Roaring Fork Valley, there's a satellite orbiting Saturn. This afternoon, from that planet's shadow, the NASA space probe will take a historic photograph of Earth. It's the first time people down here will know exactly when the earth is going to get its picture taken... and they can look up at the cosmos and smile. Ellis Robinson has the story.

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UPDATE (July 22, 9:01 AM): The Friday July 19, 2013 photograph of

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the earth and our moon, taken by Cassini, was [released](#) this past weekend.

"Consider again, that dot. That's here, that's home, that's us."

That's the late-astronomer Carl Sagan, reading one of his famous writings, The Pale Blue Dot. In 1990, Sagan told the cameras on the Voyager space probe to.. turn around, look backwards as they hurtled towards the edge of the solar system, and snap a photograph of the earth. The Pale Blue Dot photo is from 3.8 billion miles away.

"...every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived here."

It's hard to top as an iconic image. The earth is so small, floating in a sea of black, that immediately you realize how tiny and special our home is. The only problem, maybe, is that when Sagan said "Cheese," a few people had their eyes closed.

"I've always thought since then what a terrible wasted opportunity it was because if people had known in advance that their picture was going to be taken from a billion miles away..."

Carolyn Porco is an astronomer She worked with Carl Sagan on Voyager.

"It would have been a tremendous opportunity for high-fiving all over the planet, and people rejoicing in the tremendous accomplishments that made it even possible for this interplanetary photo session to even happen."

Which marks today, July 19th as a special moment in history. Starting at 1:27 PM mountain time, there will be the first interstellar photo-shoot where earthlings have a heads-up beforehand. Hey, it's time to take a selfie!

"That's what motivated me to find another opportunity in the scientific plans for Cassini through the rest of the mission where we could actually take another picture like this."

Here's how it works. Cassini, NASA's space-probe that orbits Saturn, is taking advantage of Saturn's shadow from the sun, and pointing it's powerful cameras back at earth. Porco, who works on the Cassini project, has done this before. Her team captured earth in a photograph from Saturn's orbit in 2006.

"It was a tremendous composition if you look at it, with the rings backlight, the refracted image of the sun, and so on, and there in the distance is the earth. It's a beautiful composition."

That 2006 shot of the earth was actually.. an accident. A happy coincidence that earth was in the background. But it wasn't perfect.

"Actually as a picture, it isn't very high quality. And so I wanted to do it again."

This time, the photo's a full-on self-portrait, and Porco wants everyone to know. Saturn's rings, and earth, are going to be in better focus.. But, to be honest, even if you're wearing a big smile, don't expect to see yourself.

"Even though we're going to go for the greatest resolution that we have, the earth and the moon are still just going to be pixels, just single pixels each."

And seeing that we are so tiny, that's what makes images like this so special, says astrophysicist Craig Wheeler, "I think it's going to be pretty



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small. But then that's part of the point of grabbing your humanity, and putting it in the context of this amazing cosmos."

Theoretical physicist Lisa Randall says that there is scientific value in such images as well, "we fail to recognize that there are all these interesting questions at every level. And it's, maybe, looking at the earth from a slightly different perspective that helps remind us of that."

Not to mention, it's pretty rare for to have pictures of earth from a billion miles away. So, this afternoon, go outside, look up at the sky, and smile. You're going to be on camera.

For Aspen Public Radio, I'm Ellis Robinson

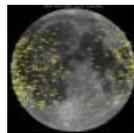
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