

CATEGORY 1 PLANET EARTH

SPACE DEBRIS

CLASSIFICATION EARTH'S ORBITING JUNKYARD



Just 40 years ago, the region of space around the Earth was in pristine condition. Today, it is an orbiting junkyard. High above our heads, the remnants of spent rocket stages, old satellites and exploded spacecraft circulate at speeds of up to 18,000 mph. The largest of the few thousand pieces are tracked from Earth, but there are millions of smaller fragments that are undetectable—until they slam into a spacecraft. And unless we find a way to clean up the skies, future missions may not survive the trip to orbit at all.

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Factoids

UNNATURAL

The threat to spacecraft from human-made space garbage is now over 1,000 times greater than that posed by natural debris.

SMALL DANGERS

There are an estimated 100,000 pieces of human-made debris in orbit of less than four inches diameter.

EAGLE EYE

Space debris tracking facilities are so sophisticated that they can identify objects as small as baseballs—in orbits of more than 1,000 miles above Earth.

