

Hello and welcome to As It Is, from VOA Learning English! I'm Steve Ember in Washington.

The American space agency NASA launched its first Voyager spacecraft in 1977. Scientists announced last year that Voyager 1 had entered interstellar space. Today on the program, we hear more about the spacecraft and something else that made the trip.

World Digital Library Reaches 9,900 Items

But first, we hear about a place right here on planet Earth where you can find images and recordings from all over the world. In fact, it currently has nearly 9,900 items from 80 different countries. Karen Leggett reports.

What is a place where you could find old pictures of camels carrying people to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and also books about ancient Aztecs in Mexico?

It is all found in the World Digital Library. Its collection is available on the Internet. The library has books, ancient writings, music and photographs. Partners include national or university libraries, museums and other cultural organizations.

The librarian of the United States Congress, James Billington, launched the WDL in 2009. John Von Oudenaren is the director of the library. He says Mr. Billington wanted it to include items that are both interesting and important.

“So we are looking for things from each country and each culture, each civilization – things that are unique, important and help to tell the story of that place.”

Every item is explained in the six official languages of the United Nations – English, Arabic, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian - plus Portuguese.

Von Oudenaren says users include schools, researchers and anyone interested.

“People say this is what the Internet should be about and that kind of warms my heart.”

He was especially happy to hear from one teacher in New York City.

“She said it was really wonderful to have a site where every kid in the class, no matter what country they were from, or where their parents were from, could search and find something about that country that was interesting and important.”

Musa Murawih is a researcher for the WDL from Sudan. He works with all the materials that are in Arabic. He recently published rare photographs of Mecca from 1885.

“These camels were lying with their heads on the ground which is very unusual for a camel. It means this camel has traveled for so long and the humps of those camels were very thin too meaning they have exhausted all the fat they have stored there.”

Musa Murawih believes the library provides tools for understanding especially among Arabs, Muslims and the United States.

He says the WDL is posting many items about important developments in Arabic and Islamic science.

“The kind of cultural heritage you are promoting is exactly I believe what the world needs, which is basically all these cultures contribute together to promote understanding throughout humanity in general.”

Anyone may search the World Digital Library by subject, time period, kind of document or area of the world. The website is www.wdl.org. I’m Karen Leggett.

You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English. Thanks for joining us today. I’m Steve Ember.

Late last year, NASA announced that Voyager 1 had become the first spacecraft to reach interstellar space. That is the space between stars. Officials are not exactly sure when the spacecraft crossed over. But they said scientific measurements confirmed that it has entered interstellar space. Avi Arditti has more on the story.

Voyager 1 Carries Special Item into Interstellar Space

The spacecraft carries the voices and sounds of human beings and animals that were living on Earth in 1977 when it was launched. The sounds are on a gold-plated phonograph record secured to the side of the spacecraft.

Tim Ferris mixed the audio that went on the record.

“The record is a conventional long-playing phonograph record, except that it’s made of copper and it’s covered in gold and then it’s put inside a titanium case to protect it.”

Tim Ferris was one of a small group of people who worked to persuade the American space agency to attach the record to Voyager’s side. Annie Druyan, another member of the group, says the original idea came from Frank Drake, an astronomer at the University of California.

“And it seemed to Frank that the best way to compress as much information as possible in a very small space was to do it on a phonograph record.”

And there is plenty of information on the record. It contains messages in 59 human languages.

It has 118 pictures of life on Earth, and 27 pieces of music.

Tim Ferris says these demonstrate the diversity of human creation.

“So there’s music on the record from Europe and the United States, but also from Africa, and the South Pacific and South America. Georgia, Russia, and, you know, all these places -- China, India.”

Shortly after American astronauts returned from space in 1968, the space agency released a photograph of the Earth rising from behind the moon. Margaret Weitekamp is with the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum. She says that picture deeply touched people like Frank Drake and his partner on the gold record project, the scientist and TV star Carl Sagan. The photo made them think carefully about how they might present all humanity, not just the nation that sent the spacecraft up.

“Knowing that that picture was taken by a human being I think profoundly changed the thoughts of these people and really made them start thinking about ‘If we are this, you know, pale blue dot in this ocean of vastness, then how do we communicate something about who we are?’”

As for the message they chose, Tim Ferris says they could not have chosen anything better.

“You can’t say that an Indian raga or a piece by Bach or a Japanese Shakuhachi piece, you can’t say it ‘means’ something that you can put into words. It is its own end product. It, it means really what it is, similar to things in nature. A flower isn’t a way of expressing something else, it’s the end product. It is what it is.”

I’m Avi Arditti.

And that’s As It Is for today. I’m Steve Ember.

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