

Space junk

1. Do you ever stop to think about the rubbish floating around in space? Every time a mission to space is undertaken, some type of space junk is left behind. It was once thought that it would be okay to leave junk behind in space as it would eventually disintegrate. However, this thinking has changed.
2. In 2000, it was estimated there were more than 110 000 objects, made by people, floating in space. Each of these is a remnant of past missions to explore the unknown. About 200 objects are added to space each year. Some of the junk floating around includes: 2671 working and non-working satellites; 90 space probes; 6096 miscellaneous items including nuts, bolts and gloves; and many more. The United States space missions are responsible for the largest portion of space junk. It has contributed more than 3758 articles of space junk since the first satellite, *Vanguard 1*, launched in 1958. Australia has contributed seven satellites and two units of debris. During its 15 years in orbit, the Russian space station, *Mir*, contributed 200 units of space junk—most of which were rubbish bags!
3. The US space command keeps track of objects orbiting the Earth using high-tech electronic eyes to track and catalogue the rubbish. They are able to see items the size of baseballs floating 965 km above the Earth's surface. It estimates there is more than 1.8 million kilograms of garbage orbiting the Earth. Some items travel up to 28 000 kilometres per hour! Tracking the junk is a priority for the safety of astronauts in space. A tiny speck of paint can gouge a 2-cm scratch in the window of a space shuttle. Imagine what damage something the size of a baseball could do!
4. Scientists are now working on a possible solution for cleaning up space, called the *Orion Project*. It would use a laser powerful enough to force the junk further out. Most people think it wouldn't work and it would be easier to simply reduce the amount of 'stuff' sent up into space!

