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Astrophysicist to Discuss Search for 'Another Earth' at Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Alan Dressler, a world-famous astrophysicist, will be in Santa Barbara this week to address the topic of life on other planets in the first lecture in what will be an annual series on astrophysics, presented jointly by the Department of Physics at the University of California, Santa Barbara and the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

Dressler's talk, "The search for another Earth: looking for life in all the right places," will be on Wednesday, May 24, 2006, at 7:30 p.m. at the museum. Dressler is based at the Pasadena, California branch of the Carnegie Observatories.

Tommaso Treu, assistant professor of physics at UCSB, noted that Dressler is "one of the best public speakers on astrophysics."

The physics department and the museum have organized this annual prize lecture on astrophysics which will bring a world-famous astrophysicist to spend a week at UCSB. During that same week, the astrophysicist will also deliver a public lecture at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

Dressler will explain that astronomers have joined a growing number of scientists who seek to understand the origins of life on Earth and to look for life beyond Earth.

Studies of Earth's extreme environments suggest that life here may have arisen in conditions that were hostile compared to the land and oceans of Earth today.

However, because these difficult conditions may have been common during the formation of planets around nearly every star in our galaxy, the development of life as we know it may not be a rare event. The number of planets discovered around our neighbor stars is growing, and research has begun to address basic questions such as: How common are solar systems like our own? How common are rocky worlds like Earth? If Earth-like worlds are common, future space missions will be able to study them in enough detail to determine if they are suitable for life, and indeed, if life is actually present.

Dressler is known for his studies of distant galaxies and of the large-scale structure of the universe. In addition to his scientific research, Dressler authored the popular book, "Voyage to the Great Attractor: Exploring Intergalactic Space." He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1996, and won the Newton Lacey Pierce Prize from the American Astronomical Society in 1983. In 1999, NASA awarded him its Public Service Medal. He is a member of the Terrestrial Planet Finder Coronagraph Science and Technology Definition Team.

Tickets are \$6 for members of the museum, \$9 for non-members, and \$3 for students. For ticket information, call the admissions desk at 805-682-4711 ext. 100 or send an email to astroastro@sbnature2.org

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