Stephen Hawking recently advised that we ought not to make contact with intelligent aliens, because they would be so much more advanced than us. He states, “I think the outcome would be much as when Christopher Columbus first landed in America, which didn’t turn out very well for the Native Americans” (Hawking 2010). He suggests that aliens might simply raid the Earth for its resources and then move on. I speculate that they may use us as they would any other resource with as little respect as we have shown to other life forms with which we currently share a planet. Or perhaps they would see us as an out-of-control species of pest and, with the kindness and ethical values of an advanced species, promptly weed us from the “Gaia-garden” that we call Earth (Gaia hypothesis see Lovelock 2000). They could effectively save millions of species and restore the “Gaia-balance” for the loss of one species, plus a few others dependent on humans — various body lice and some microscopic gut flora.

I would go one step further than Stephen Hawking (not something that I would usually aspire to) and ask why should we even look for intelligent life on other planets or in other parts of the universe when our closest relations, with which we share DNA and RNA, are to be found right here on Earth? Especially when so many of these relations remain undescribed and much of their natural history remains unknown to us. There are reasons to pursue the unknown — Galileo Galilei (1632), Isaac Newton (1687) and Albert Einstein (1917) have demonstrated that. But let us not forget the biodiversity that needs discovering, describing, understanding and conserving on our own planet.

“How Green is the Universe?” (Watson 2011): the forum essay in this issue, by Professor Fred Watson AM, explores a variety of overlaps where conservation has either collided with astronomy or where the two disciplines share common characteristics; it is clearly evident that one discipline informs the other, more or less, either symbolically or pragmatically. My point in asking Prof. Watson to write his essay was to broaden the thinking of Pacific Conservation Biology readers — to cause you to reflect outside your “normal spheres” of thinking, or to be simply entertained by a talented writer. Before you read Fred Watson’s essay I leave you with a simple thought, which may help you benefit from the conjunction of conservation and astronomy, “The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels” ([Henry David] Thoreau 1854).

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