



12 April 2014 - Planet Earth isn't doing that well. As some work on trying to fix what went wrong, others have turned their attention to the stars beyond.

Human activity is the root cause of climate change. The surface of our planet is changing radically. Warm places are cooling and cool places are warming, a continent of trash floats in the pacific, and wars, illnesses, injustice and social conflicts continue to affect people on all continents.

In the face of such great challenges, some believe possibilities abound...in outer space.

Today is the International Day of Human Space Flight. Space flight has captured the imagination of scientists and civil society alike since the Cold War. From Yuri Gagarin's first orbital flight, humankind has continuously strived to voyage further. Today private companies are preparing to launch commercial flights into the stratosphere - and soon beyond - and films depict healthy untouched planets for exploration.

In 2009 NASA launched the Kepler mission to track down these planets. Cooperating with astronomers known as "planet hunters" from around the world, the search for earth-like planets, which may be capable of sustaining human life, has begun. And they have found them.

Over 350 planets in our solar system are earth-sized and could possibly support life. Two

planets have just been [discovered](#) , located 1,200 light-years away in a five-planet system orbiting a star dubbed Kepler-62, they are the right distance from their sun to possibly sustain life.

Though the technology to reach them is still far away, progress is being made, as some states foresee the first manned mission to Mars taking place twenty years from now. Once relegated to the realm of science fiction, now athletes skydive from the stratosphere, and trekking amongst the stars is not only realistic, it's a goal.

Yet, can we save us from ourselves? Orbiting our planet is a veritable shell of debris left over from manned space missions and satellites from every country. According to [NASA estimates](#) , 500,000 items currently orbit our planet. Not only are future launches at risk of collisions, but should debris fall to earth, they will become man-made meteorites. Clearly our habits have followed us even to the final frontier.

But looking beyond might help us. The dream to explore also unites all humans. "Planet hunters" come from all around the world, and the International Space Station has welcomed visitors from the world over and its coordination requires cooperation from Washington to Moscow to Tokyo.

"I am confident that the International Day of Human Space Flight will remind us of our common humanity and our need to work together to conquer shared challenges", UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reminds in his [message](#) for the international day.

Perhaps focusing on light-years away can help us gain perspective and overcome our differences here on earth.