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# Tassie's crash course on comet

By LINDA SMITH

IT moved at speeds that put Superman to shame and created a stir among the world's scientists, but most Tasmanians were unaware a fiery collision between a comet and a space probe erupted in the skies above us yesterday.

Comet Temple 1 was travelling 10 times faster than a speeding bullet when it collided with a strategically placed Deep Impact space probe, in a NASA bid to learn what happens when an artificial object collides with a comet's icy nucleus.

Impact occurred about 3.50pm Tasmanian time yesterday about 133 million kilometres away and, while it wasn't earth-shattering for the average Tasmanian, it could prove to be a major step forward for Tasmanian scientists.

## Excitement

University of Tasmania physics professor Dr Stefan Dieters watched the live NASA internet footage of the crash with excitement from a university lecture theatre yesterday, along with about 40 other curious onlookers.

"It's brightening and throwing out material," he said excitedly as

pictures of the impact arrived on screen.

The Hobart astronomer is part of a group at the Mt Canopus Observatory being paid by NASA to monitor the comet's movements.

While the probe hitting the comet has been likened to the minor impact of a mosquito hitting a Boeing 767, Dr Dieters said it was enough to give scientists vital information about the make-up of comets and how they are formed.

"We've just chipped a bit of the paint off the comet," he said.

"We have a general idea of how

particles start to stick together to form comets, but the exact details we still don't know and this will hopefully fill in those blanks."

For several years Tasmania has been monitoring the formation of planets as part of a worldwide program and has one of the leading telescopes in the world.

Dr Dieters said the comet crash could be vital for more information in the program because it could help understand how comets become planets.

As the comet crash was timed with nightfall in the US, it was broad daylight in Tasmania so there was little point in Tasmanian scientists picking up their telescopes.

Dr Dieters said nothing different would be seen when looking at the night sky with the naked eye.

"As a viewing comet it's fairly pitiful," he said.

But he and fellow astronomers last night rushed to the observatory as darkness fell to catch their first real glimpses of the comet via telescope.

They will watch it closely for two months — comparing photos taken before and after the crash to see if there are any noticeable changes.

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**JUST A SCRATCH:** The Tempel 1 comet after the impact.



# THE MERCURY

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**DIRECT HIT:** Dr Stefan Dieters watches the moment of impact on a NASA website. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE



**DRIVERS' SEAT:** NASA project manager Rick Grammier, left, chief engineer Gentry Lee and Dave Spencer watch images come in at NASA.



**SPACE EXPERT:** Dr Dieters speaks to enthusiasts at the University of Tasmania.

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