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## Mir: Will It Crash or Splash?

Stewart Taggart  03.21.01 | 2:00 AM

SYDNEY, Australia -- As they look out to sea in these waning days of summer, Australians and New Zealanders are thinking more about the fading warmth of the waves and winds --- and not the approaching cataclysmic curtain call of the Russian space station, Mir.

But sometime late Friday afternoon, Mir should splash into an isolated part of the South Pacific Ocean, roughly equidistant from New Zealand and Chile. Huge individual chunks of the 135-ton station could slam into the sea at speeds of 6,400 kilometers per hour.

While the splashdown should make little more than a short-lived and noisy divot in the oceanic vastness, woe betide anything that gets in its way. As a precaution, New Zealand is advising maritime traffic to avoid the area later this week.

However, if Mir gets a mind of its own in its final hours, disobeying its masters and hanging aloft for a few more spins around planet Earth before plunging to its death, a far bigger problem could develop. Each of those additional turns would shift Mir's orbit ever further west --- potentially over Australia and New Zealand.

But in the capitals of Wellington and Canberra, this unlikely outcome is eliciting little more than careful platitudes slightly above an official yawn. Official estimates are that Mir has less than a 3 percent chance of hitting land.

"We've got extreme confidence in the Russians' plans for de-orbiting Mir," says Brian Flanagan, spokesman for Emergency Management Australia in Canberra. "What's more, we also have full contingency plans in place with state and territory governments, and can swing into action immediately if required."

In New Zealand, officials appeared equally unruffled.

"We're just in monitoring mode," says Patrick Helm, chairman of New Zealand's ad hoc Satellite Re-Entry Committee in Wellington. "Our prime concern now is that the expected re-entry point is within our maritime navigational area."

Under international treaties, New Zealand has responsibility for monitoring navigation in the remote area where Mir is expected to come down, roughly 47 degrees south latitude and 140 degrees west longitude.

As long as everyone stays away from there, and the Russians exert some last-minute control over the space station, Mir could go from orbiting Earth to vanishing beneath the waves in less time than it takes to read a few pages of *Moby Dick*.

If Mir's burial at sea happens largely out of sight, it will be highly unlike the celestial fanfare that accompanied the American space station Skylab's crash back to Earth in July 1979.

That space station, roughly half the size of Mir, crashed into the Indian Ocean and parts of Western Australia, including suburban Perth, Western Australia's capital.

For months afterward, parts of the Skylab were picked out of the Outback. Some pieces are still being found today.

"It's amazing, but everyone still talks about it like it happened just yesterday," says Debbie Shearer, secretary for Esperance shire, a huge Western Australian Outback area of about 13,500 people.

Skylab came crashing down over Esperance and the surrounding area in the early morning hours of July 12, 1979. When it crashed, it spread hundreds of pieces of itself over the desert.

Many of these pieces are now artifacts in the homes of local residents.

In its six-year life, Skylab orbited Earth nearly 35,000 times. But in its final days before crashing, it was totally beyond the reach or control of U.S. space program experts.

Afterwards, U.S. officials admitted they'd been lucky the aimless Skylab had chosen one of the world's least populated areas to come down.