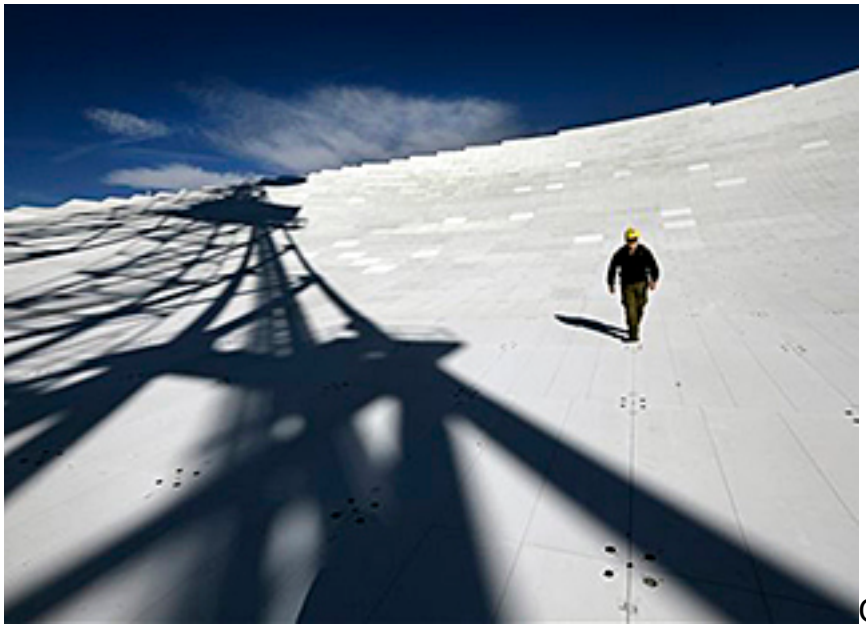
Science in Silence in Radio Quiet Zone

Patrick Semansky, Associated Press



GREEN BANK, WV (AP) — In these parts, a pay phone is a visitor's best option for reaching the rest of the world. A cell phone signal is an hour away by car. Wifi is forbidden. The radio plays nothing but static. And other than the occasional passing pickup truck whose driver offers a wave, it's dead silent.

Seemingly off the beaten path, this community of fewer than 200 residents is the heart of the National Radio Quiet Zone, a 13,000-square-mile area where state and federal laws discourage the use of everyday devices that emit electromagnetic waves. The quiet zone aims to protect sensitive radio telescopes at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, as well as a nearby Naval research facility, from man-made interference. This silence enables the observatory to detect energy in outer space that is equivalent to the energy emitted by a single snowflake hitting the ground.

While scientists listen intently for clues from the universe on its structure and origins, residents in some of the timeworn railroad towns in this valley maintain a fundamentally tech-less lifestyle that for most Americans is a memory. More than 90 percent of American adults have a cell phone today, yet some locals fondly recall ditching their wireless device after moving here. After all, it's useless, and that's fine by them.

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