



Comparing Comets

TEACHER GUIDE

Background Information:

Cometary scientists think that the surface layer of a nucleus is highly evolved. Meaning, in successive orbits that take it close to the Sun, the surface has been altered by exposure to sunlight—causing outgassing, and sublimation of volatile substances from the surface exposed to the Sun.

For this activity, your students will play the role of cometary scientist, using images to observe and compare the surfaces of two comet nuclei from close range. Comets are so small that, even when viewing through a large telescope, they are just points of light in the sky. And these points of light are reflections of sunlight on the comet's coma, the gaseous cloud surrounding the nucleus, and the dust tails of the comet, not the nucleus itself.

Tip:

Introduce this activity by first having students compare two images that are more familiar (i.e., baseball vs. football.)

So how did we obtain the images shown in the student activity sheet?

They were taken from two spacecraft in NASA's Discovery program as they penetrated the comets' comas.

- The image on the left is the surface of comet Wild 2, taken from the Stardust spacecraft in January 2004 at a distance of about 237 km.
- The image on the right is the surface of comet Tempel 1, taken from the Deep Impact Impactor spacecraft in July 2005 at a distance of about 1500 km.

Both images represent each comet at a scale of 15 m/pixel. They are shown here displayed on the same intensity scale.

For information and activities surrounding the basics of comet science visit *Exploring Comets and Modeling Mission Success* at: <http://deepimpact.umd.edu/educ/ExploringComets.html>

Exploring similarities and differences, one of the nine strategies identified in *Classroom Instruction that Works*, has been shown to increase student achievement. This exercise allows students to compare and contrast the nucleus of two comets and listen to audio files of NASA scientists and middle-school students conducting the activity. The imagery and data are authentic and related to real-world science that is currently underway. By comparing their responses to those of NASA scientists, students realize that while their vocabulary may be different, their process parallels that of the scientists and the task of doing science is well within their reach.

Objectives:

- Compare surface features on the nucleus of two comets.
- Explain some possible causes for differences between the two nuclei.
- List questions that you have about the surface of comet nuclei.

Materials

- Student background information on comets
- Student activity and recording sheet
- Audio files of scientists and students comparing two comet nuclei.
- Access to computers with ImageJ software (optional for quantitative analysis)

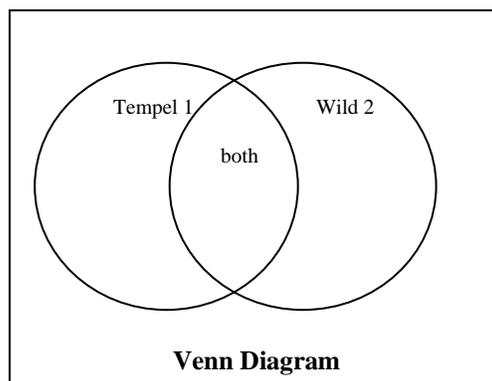
Procedure:

Part 1

1. Ask students what they know about comets. Elicit student responses without comment. You may want to list these initial ideas on the board.
2. Provide some background on comets using one or more comet resources such as materials from NASA:
 - Stardust-NExT Comet Interactive:
http://stardustnext.jpl.nasa.gov/multimedia/comet_interactive/index.html
 - Deep Impact: 10 Important Comet Facts:
http://deepimpact.umd.edu/educ/mod_ExploringComets/10_CometFacts.pdf
 - EPOXI: Comet on a Stick:
http://epoxi.umd.edu/4education/mod_cometstick/Modeling_Comet EG.pdf
 - Stardust NExT: The Comet Chronicle article on the Comet vs. Cow:
<http://stardustnext.jpl.nasa.gov/education/pdfs/CometChronicle.pdf>
 - Comet Fun Fact Sheet:
http://stardustnext.jpl.nasa.gov/mission/pdfs/comet_fun_sheet3.pdf

At a minimum, students should understand that comets are ancient members of the solar system made of ice and rock; they travel in elliptical orbits around the Sun and consist of a coma (head), a nucleus beneath the coma, and sometimes two or more tails.

3. Explain to students that today they will work as scientists to compare the nucleus of two comets from two different NASA missions. The first is comet Wild 2 (pronounced Vilt Two), which was imaged by NASA's Stardust Spacecraft. The second is comet Tempel 1, imaged by NASA's Deep Impact spacecraft.
4. Assemble students into small groups of 2 to 4. Distribute the student activity sheets and ask students to record both qualitative and quantitative observations on the Venn diagram on their sheet. If students are not familiar with a Venn diagram, explain that the middle should include features of the nucleus that are found on both surfaces and that the space on either side of the diagram should include features that are unique to each one. If students are not familiar with the differences between observation and inference, refer to the box below and provide some examples.



Note:

In comparing the comets, you may note some descriptions include only observations, while some include interpretation too.

- We suggest students include observations only, making interpretations a separate step.
- When students are comfortable with the observations with practice, the interpretation flows more easily, as they will hear is the case with many experienced astronomers.

5. Provide students with enough time to make several observations. Once they have had ample time to record observations, ask them to report out some of the similarities and differences they recorded. Possible responses are found at the end of this guide.

Part 2

1. Explain that they will now listen to two audio clips.
 - a. The first is from a middle school class who completed this activity in Boaz, Alabama.
 - b. The second clip is NASA scientists who completed a similar exercise on these two surfaces.

As they listen, ask students to listen for similarities and differences in the descriptions.

Note: There are two audio files from students and three audio files from scientists. The first audio file from the scientists should provide enough information for students to get the idea that scientists often observe the same features, but may use different vocabulary to describe what they see.

2. If you are interested in having students make quantitative analyses of the comet images with image analysis software, have them complete the procedure as directed at the end of this teacher guide.
3. Provide students with time to respond to the follow-up questions in small groups before reviewing the answers as a class.
 - How can you tell the Sun's position in relation to this image? Provide two reasons for your answer. For locating the Sun's position, look at the shadows and the location of the bright spots on each nucleus to determine the Sun's location.
 - Elicit student responses. Provide clues by asking the student to look at the shadows cast by objects on each of the surfaces. Also, call their attention to the symbols and arrows at the bottom of the image. The Θ symbol shown indicates the direction of the Sun.
 - Based on your comparisons and contrasts, why do you think the two surfaces are different? What factors may have caused these differences?
 - Accept student responses. Students might suggest that the two surfaces are located in different parts of the solar system, or have different orbits around the Sun. Some might suggest that the age of the two comets might be different.

- What questions do you have about these two bodies? How would you go about answering these questions?
 - Student answers will vary. For the second question, students might suggest sending a spacecraft to orbit the comet for an extended period of time.
 - Use the following links containing background for cratering/collisions after the students have given their answers:
<http://deepimpact.umd.edu/mission/updates/update-200512.html>
http://www.planetary.org/explore/topics/asteroids_and_comets/wild2.html
 - Listen to the audio clip of scientists comparing the surfaces of these to comet nuclei. How did your description compare with the description on this page? Optional: Read the surface revealed at: <http://deepimpact.jpl.nasa.gov/results/excavating.html>. Scroll down to the bottom of this page for a description of the surface of the nucleus of comet Tempel1.
 - Student answers will vary.
4. “You have just compared two comets, (Tempel 1 and Wild 2). The EPOXI spacecraft will arrive at comet Hartley 2 in the fall of 2010. Predict how the surface of this comet may have changed. What would you like to know about these comets in order to make an accurate prediction?”

End the session by saying that “You analyzed two images of a comet in much the same way as a NASA scientist. While the words that you used to make observations, interpretations, and predictions might be different, the process is very much the same.”

Optional High School Digital Image Analysis Procedure:

Using ImageJ software, compare features on the two comets. Note the names of the comets for labeling. Follow this procedure to make some comparative measurements.

Obtain *ImageJ* found at: <http://rsb.info.nih.gov/ij/download/zips/ij134.zip> for free (after download, right click and extract all files).

1. Launch the ImageJ program (ij.jar) and choose File > Open to find and open each comet image for comparison.
2. Move the windows of each image so that they are side-by-side with the ImageJ dashboard at the top of your screen.
3. Using the Oval Selection tool button, draw an oval around the largest crater on each of the two comets.
 - a. They should be whole craters
 - b. Look for clear rims with shadows characteristic of impact craters rather than smooth-looking surfaces
4. Use Analyze > Set Measurements to choose area, perimeter, and anything else you choose to measure in pixels. Use Analyze > Measure to compare the areas. This will take some trial and error.
5. Choose Edit > Draw or Control D to make the ovals permanent.
6. Label your craters using the Text Tool button.
 - Include their area and perimeter
 - Choose Edit > Draw or Control D to make each label permanent. Use labels like W1, W2, T1, T2 for later comparison.
 - Figure out the area of each circular feature using the Oval or Polygon Selection tools. Remember to measure the area, draw a perimeter around the circular feature and use Analyze > Measure to find the area. Save the areas in a separate folder for each comet. They are text data files measured in pixels.
7. Challenge:
 - Figure out all of the areas of all of your craters.
 - Use a calculator or spreadsheet to determine the average area of each feature.
 - Use similar methods to determine the area or length of other irregular features. You may also want to use the Image menu to manipulate the appearance of the comets to better reveal other characteristics such as shadow length.

Questions:

1. How did the use of the ImageJ software help you analyze the two comet images?
2. Compare the craters on Tempel 1 and Wild 2:
 - a. Average area
 - b. Frequency
 - c. Location
3. What other (non-circular) surface features were measured?
4. Compare these features on both Tempel 1 and Wild 2:
 - a. Average area
 - b. Frequency
 - c. Location
5. How do the orbital paths affect what we can deduce from the average crater areas and the number of impact craters about the age of the comets?

National Science Education Standards Addressed:

Grades 6–12

Science as Inquiry

[Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry](#)

- Identify questions and concepts that guide scientific investigations
- Design and conduct scientific investigations
- Use technology and mathematics to improve investigations and communications
- Formulate and revise scientific explanations and models using logic and evidence

Project 2061 Benchmarks Addressed

Grades 6–8

The Universe

[Solar System](#)

- ...chunks of rock mixed with ice having, off center orbits that carry them close to the sun, where the sun's radiation (of light and particles) boils off frozen materials from their surfaces and pushes it into a long illuminated tail.

Possible Responses to Venn Diagram:

