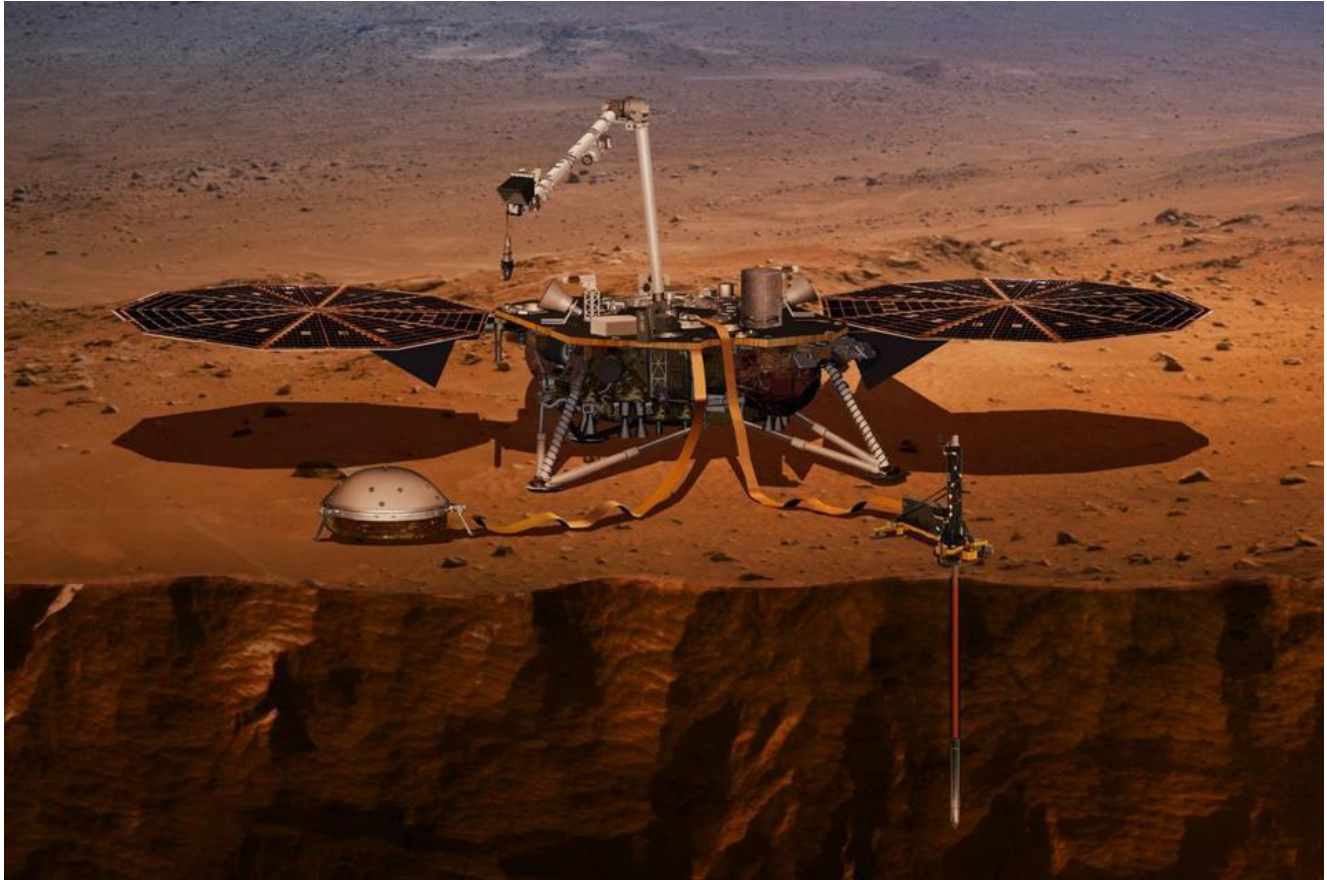




Metro

Harvard expert says Mars landing will provide important insights



NASA/AP

A rendering shows the InSight lander drilling into the surface of Mars.

By [Martin Finucane](#) | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 26, 2018

Avi Loeb, chairman of the astronomy department at Harvard University, said Monday he was looking forward to seeing the first picture sent from NASA's Insight lander Monday afternoon after it makes [its perilous descent to Mars](#).

“Any astronomer is excited by any mission that informs us about objects within our solar system or beyond,” he said.

The Insight lander was expected to touch down Monday afternoon after a six-month, 300-million-mile journey. The \$1 billion international project will bring a robotic geologist to the Mars surface after a harrowing deceleration of 12,300 miles per hour to zero miles per hour in just six minutes. The touchdown is expected at 2:47 p.m., with signals from the lander reaching the Earth at 2:54 p.m.

WATCH LIVE: NASA’s coverage of the landing

The mission will yield “important information,” said Loeb.

“This one is equipped with seismometers and a boring device with a heat probe. This equipment will allow it to map the interior of Mars in unprecedented detail over the next two years and provide us with insight on the form and evolution of rocky planets,” he said.

“What we would like to understand is what is the geology, what is the interior of Mars like, how different it is from Earth,” he said.

But the mission is not expected to provide any insight on the mystery of whether life once existed on the planet, said Loeb, who recently [caused a stir](#) by [suggesting that a strange interstellar object that visited our solar system could be a piece of alien-created debris](#).

Loeb said he is looking forward to [the Mars 2020 lander](#) because it will “inform us more about the prospects for life.

Loeb said the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, where he directs the Institute for Theory and Computation, is not involved in the project; it usually

specializes in using telescopes to study more distant objects. Harvard scientists have been involved, however, in probes to study the sun.

“There is a lot of interest in Mars,” he said, noting comments by billionaire tech mogul Elon Musk that he wanted to die on Mars “just not on impact.”

Musk also recently said there’s [a 70 percent chance that he’ll go to Mars](#).

Loeb said that while people may [dream of inhabiting Mars](#), “it’s not at all clear that humans can survive on Mars.”

He said the problem is deadly radiation, which Earth’s magnetic field shields humans from. “We just don’t know” if the radiation bombardment would be survivable, he said.

“It’s not at all clear that there will be a colony one day, but we would like to know as much as as we can before sending anyone,” he said.

“There is quite a reasonable possibility that humans cannot survive,” he said. “We’d better protect our planet here.”