

Ancient life as a guide for Alien Earths

CAPS Meeting, October 25, 2023

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University of Wisconsin – Madison

Department of Bacteriology

Research Group: [Life on Ancient Earth](#)

PI: Center for Early Life and Evolution, UW-Madison

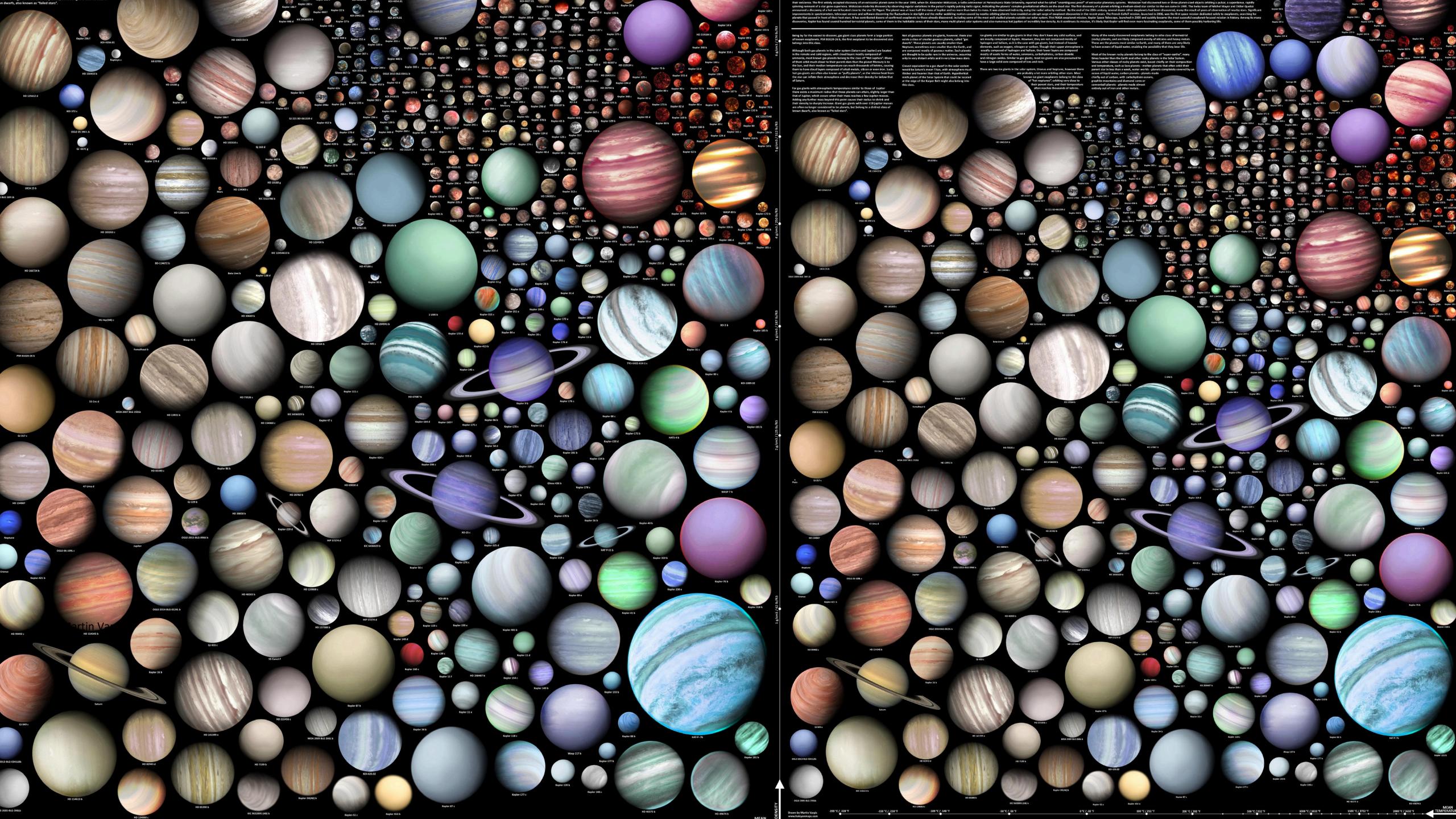
bkacar@wisc.edu



THE
KAÇAR
LAB



LIFE
FROM EARLY CELLS TO MULTICELLULARITY



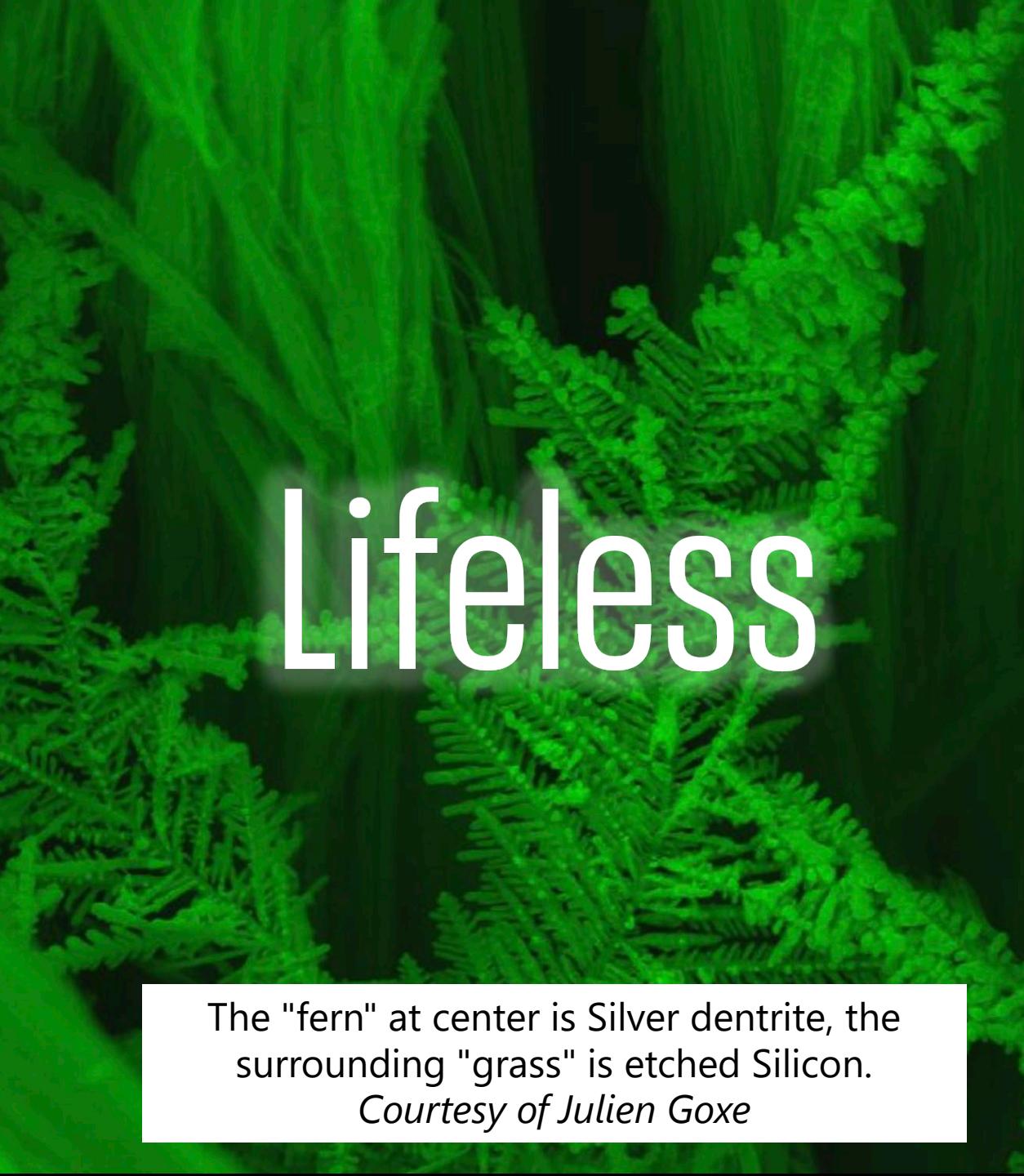




Lifeless

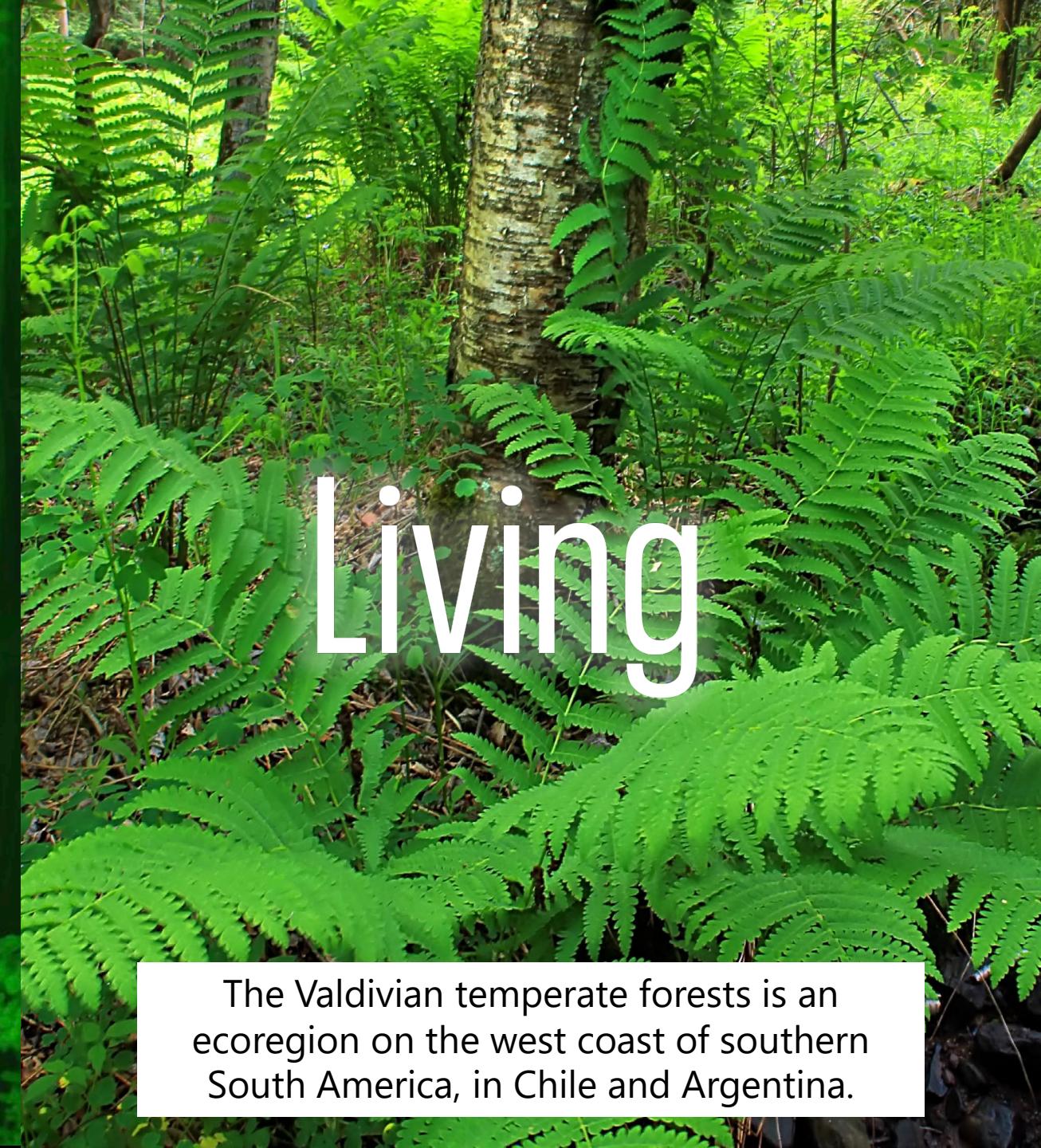


Living



Lifeless

The "fern" at center is Silver dentrite, the surrounding "grass" is etched Silicon.
Courtesy of Julien Goxe

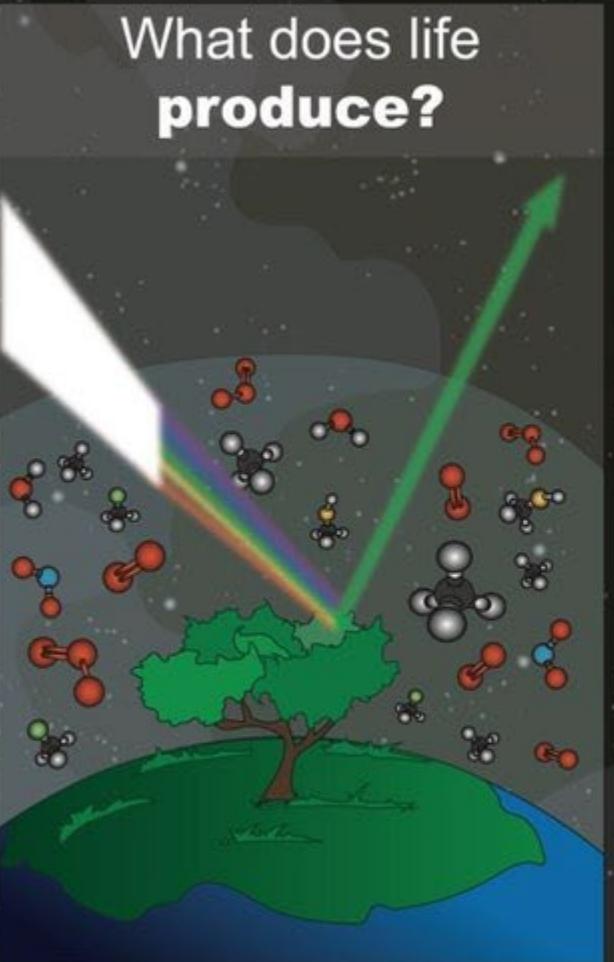


Living

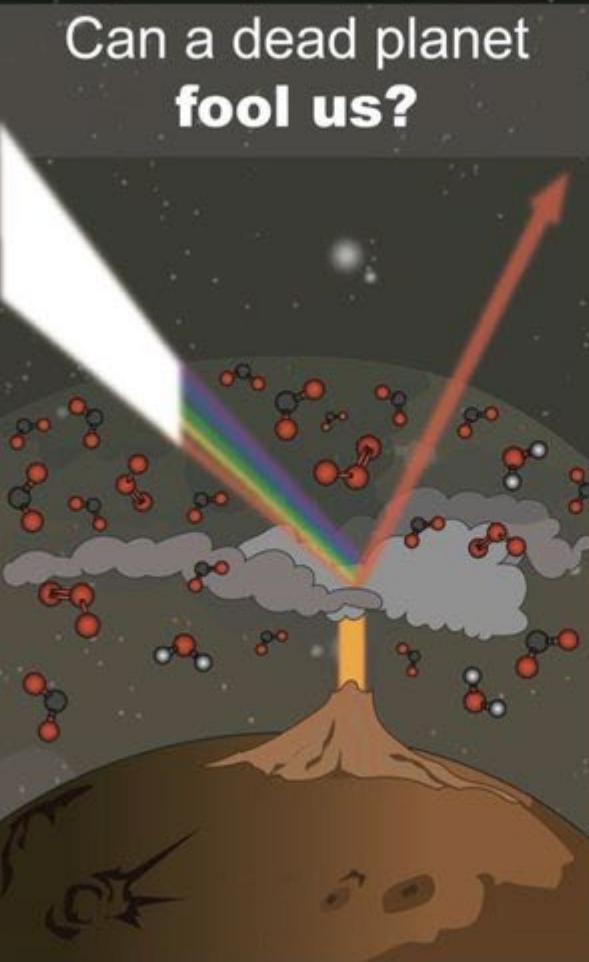
The Valdivian temperate forests is an ecoregion on the west coast of southern South America, in Chile and Argentina.

To become a biosignature, a phenomenon must be reliably produced by life.

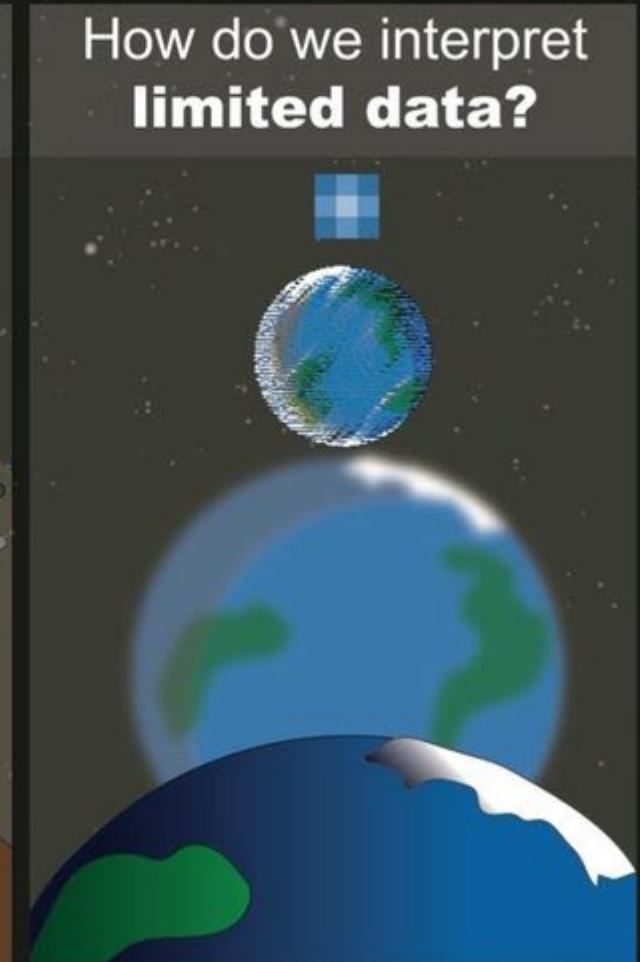
What does life
produce?



Can a dead planet
fool us?



How do we interpret
limited data?



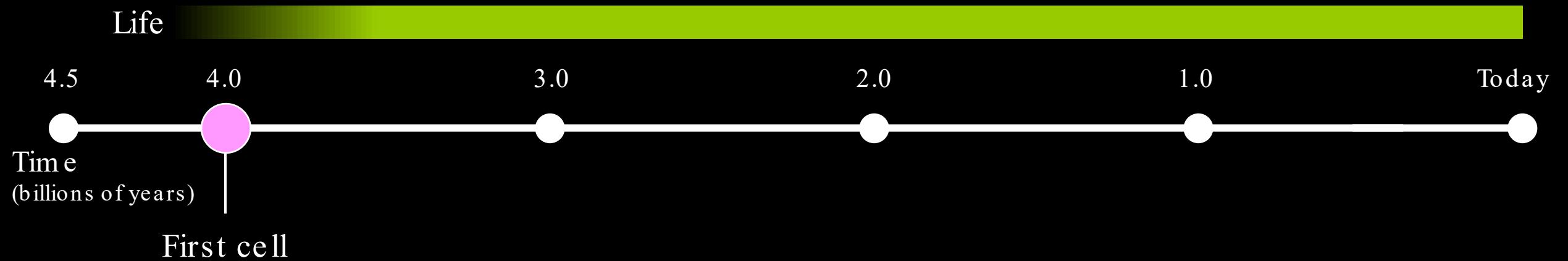
How do we **quantify**
our **certainties**?



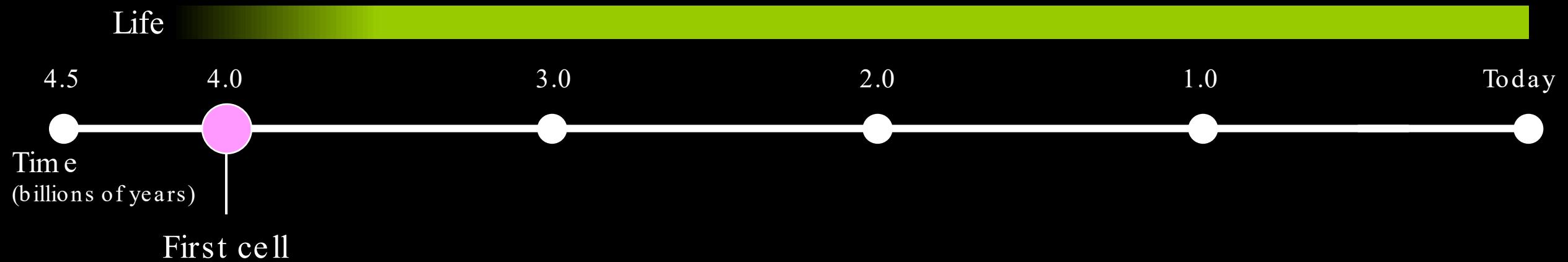
A wide-angle photograph of a dark, star-filled night sky. The stars are concentrated in a central band of the Milky Way, appearing in shades of white, blue, and purple. Below the sky, a dark body of water reflects the light from the stars. In the foreground, the silhouettes of large, dark rock formations are visible, creating a sense of depth and scale. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and awe-inspiring.

We are largely unaware of how environmental and evolutionary changes impacted our planet

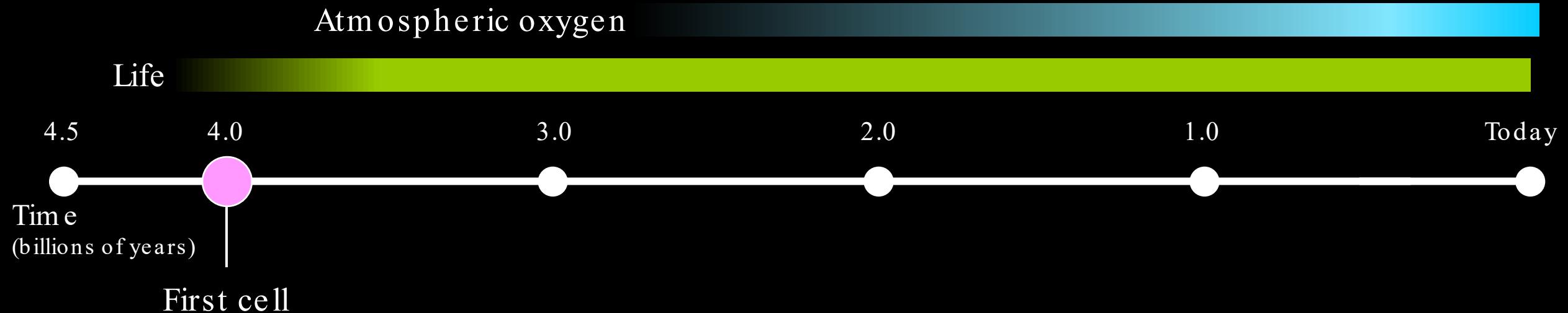
Nor the circumstances and timing of events that made the early Earth a much different place



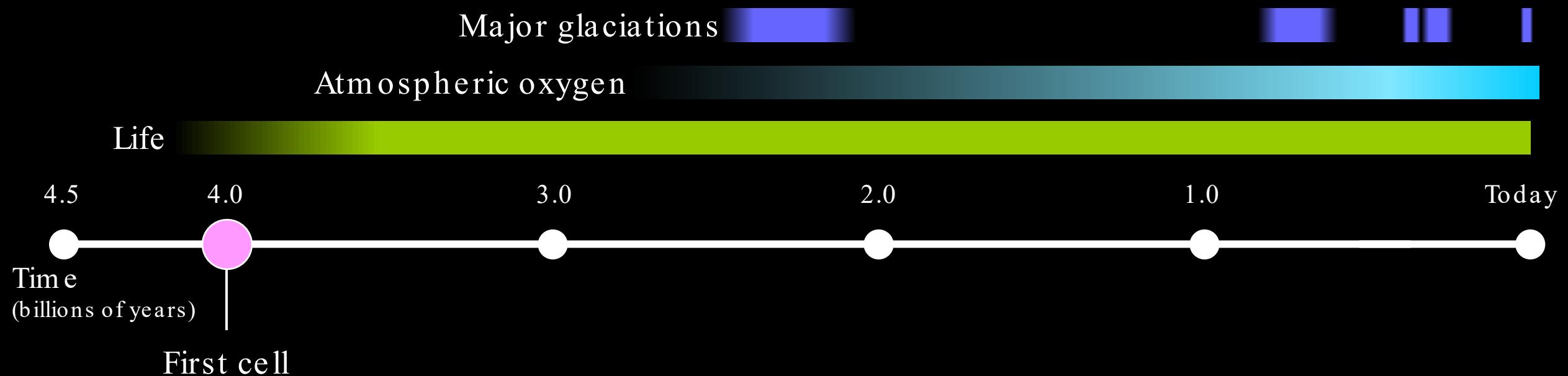
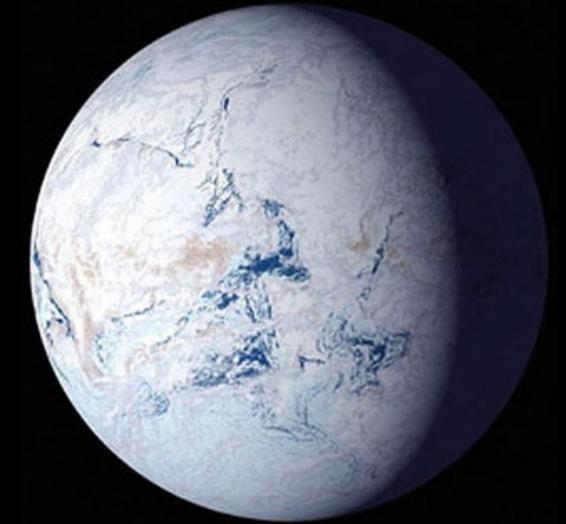
Life has been imprinted by very extreme planetary conditions



Life has been imprinted by very extreme planetary conditions



Life has been imprinted by very extreme planetary conditions



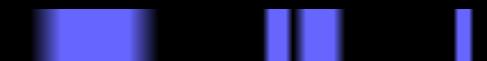
Life has been imprinted by very extreme planetary conditions



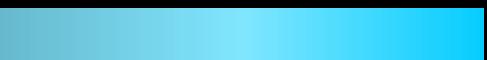
Extreme heat/ Elevated temperatures



Major glaciations



Atmospheric oxygen



Life



4.5

4.0

3.0

2.0

1.0

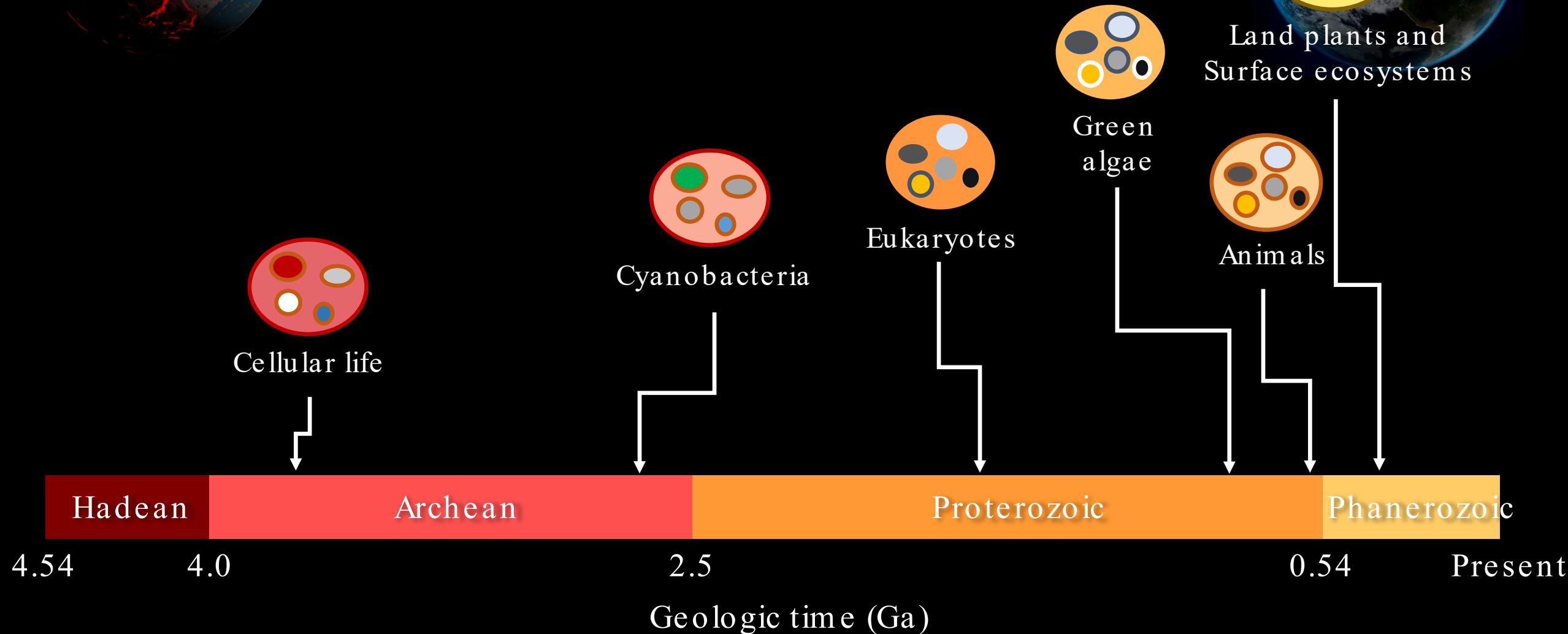
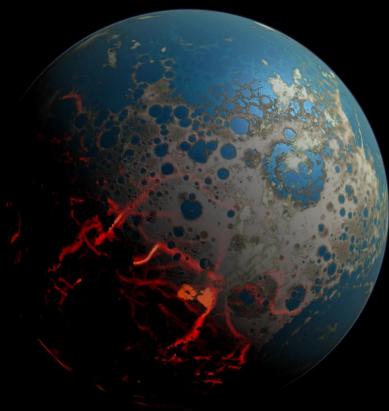
Today

Time
(billions of years)

First cell

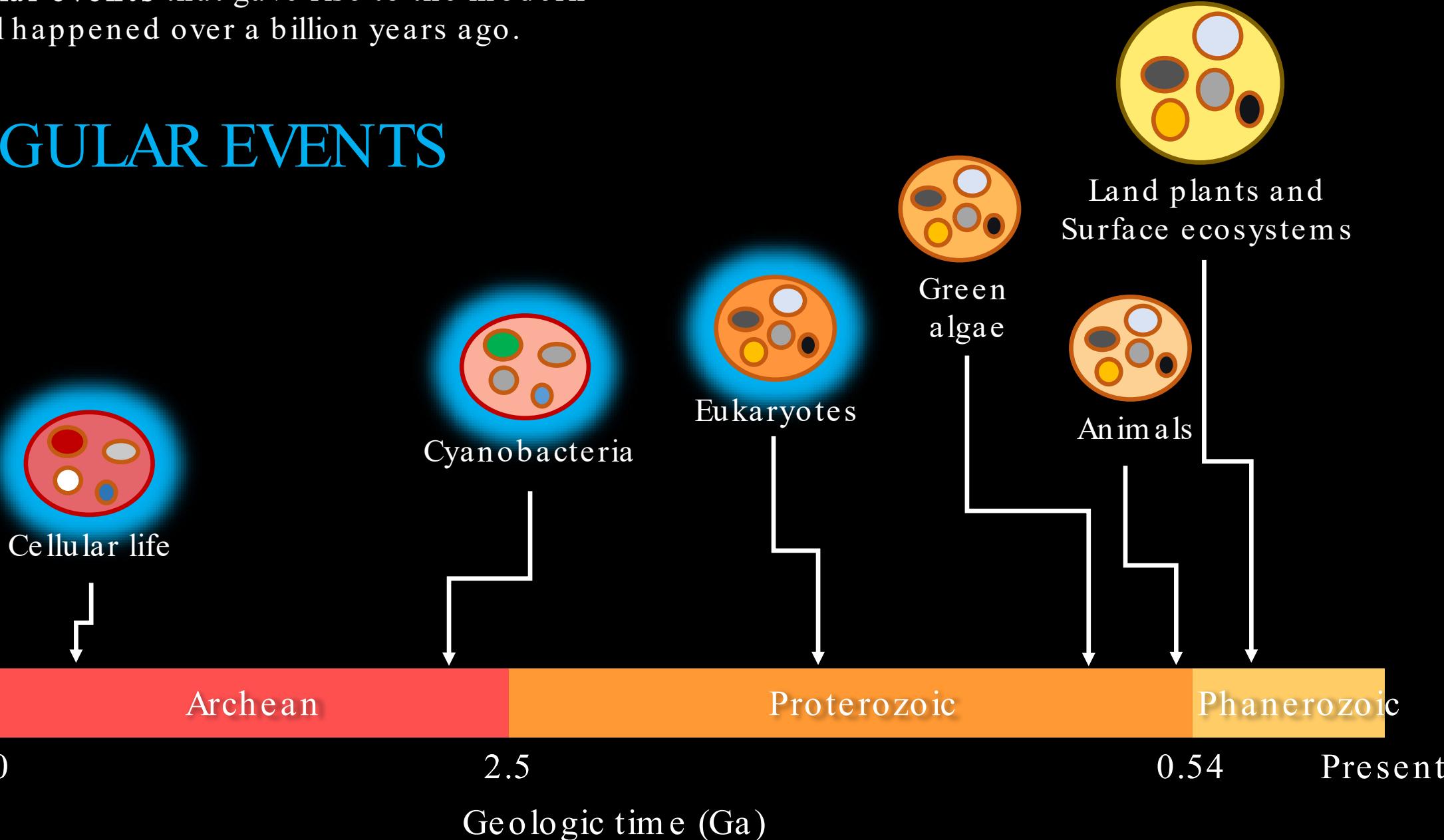


?



All the **singular events** that gave rise to the modern biosphere all happened over a billion years ago.

SINGULAR EVENTS



Early life.. It's complicated.

Adding to the challenge

Major problems piecing together Earth's biosignature history.

Early life.. It's complicated.

Adding to the challenge

Major problems piecing together Earth's biosignature history.

Example: Dominant drivers of biogeochemistry are poorly constrained

- Microbes are everywhere, but eukaryotes dominate land biomass
- O_2 is current major atmospheric component
- O_2 undoubtedly shifted ecosystem complexity AND enzymatic functions AND mineral weathering

There is no substitute for biology in the assessment of planetary-scale life in the universe.

There are almost no direct remains of life from the Earth's earliest history.

We need another way to look at ancient life on Earth

- Without the benefit (and the limitation) of comparing these events to any other in evolutionary history.

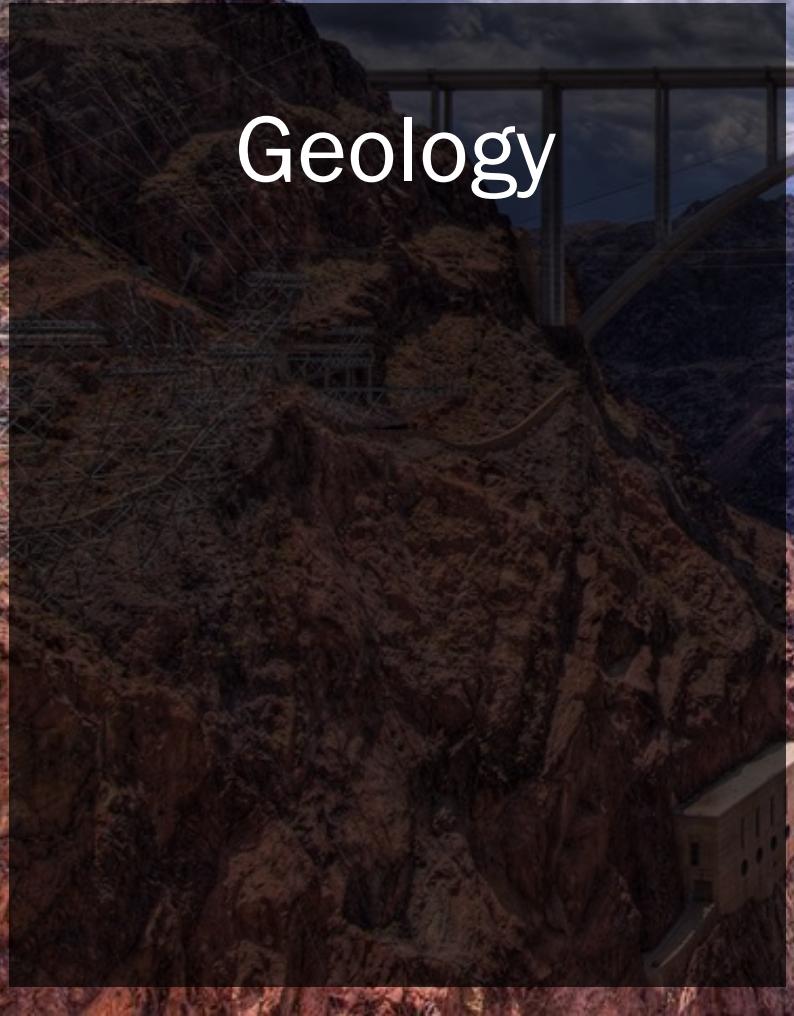
But how do we do this?

Building “The Bridge”





“The Bridge”



Geology



Biology



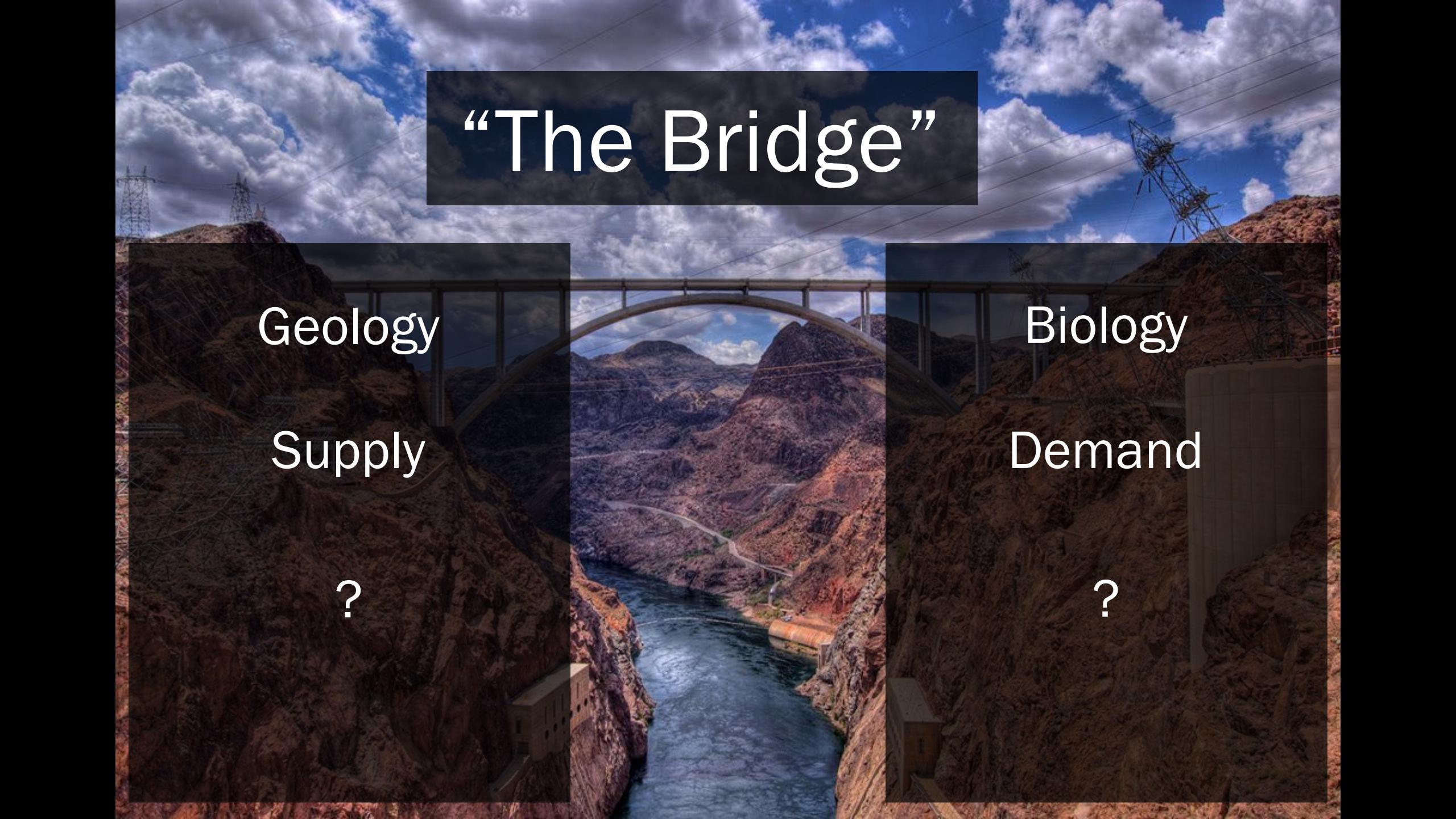
“The Bridge”

Geology

Supply

Biology

Demand



“The Bridge”

Geology

Supply

?

Biology

Demand

?

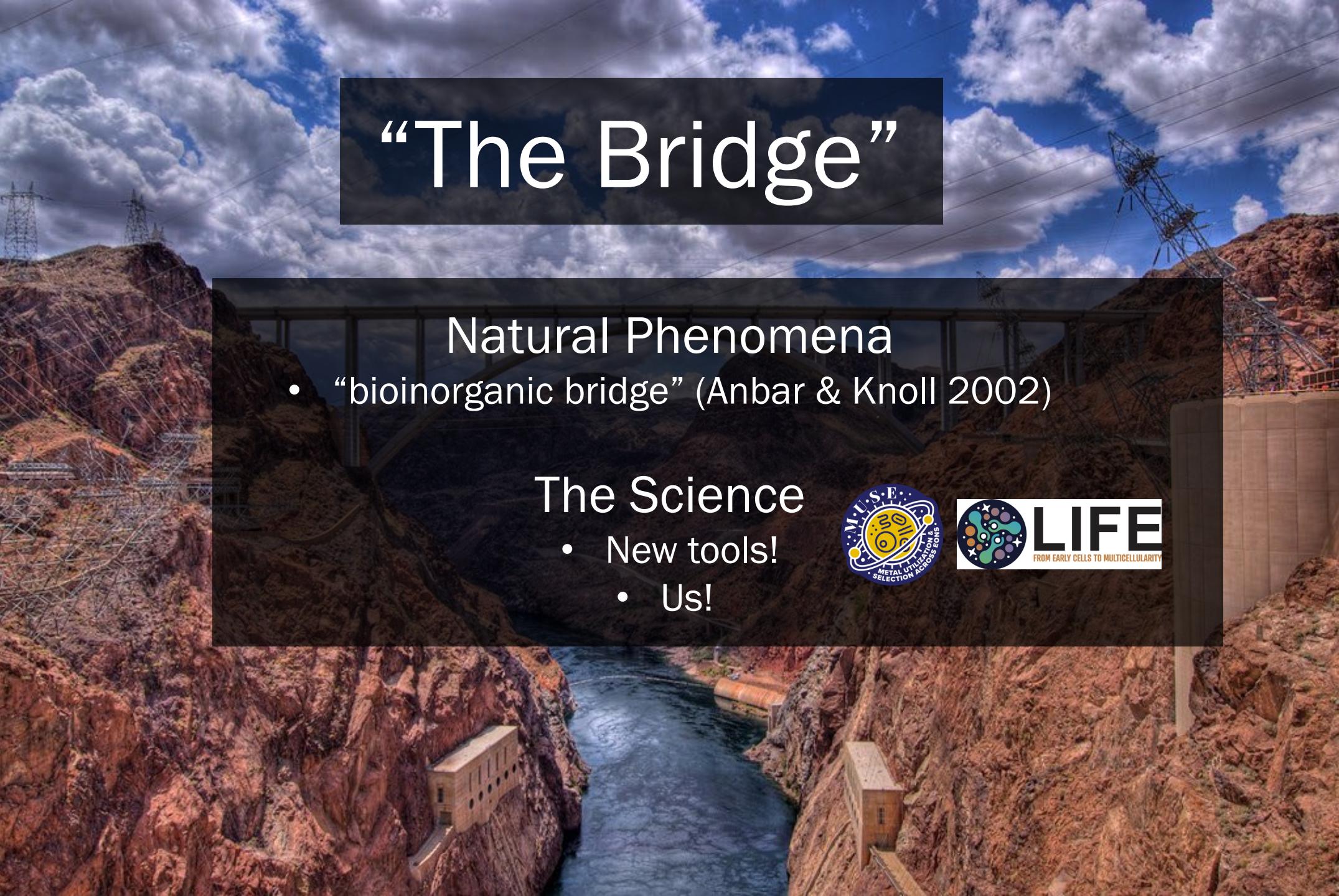
“The Bridge”

Natural Phenomena

- “bioinorganic bridge” (Anbar & Knoll 2002)

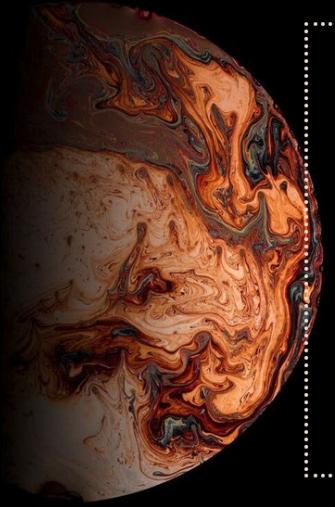
The Science

- New tools!
- Us!



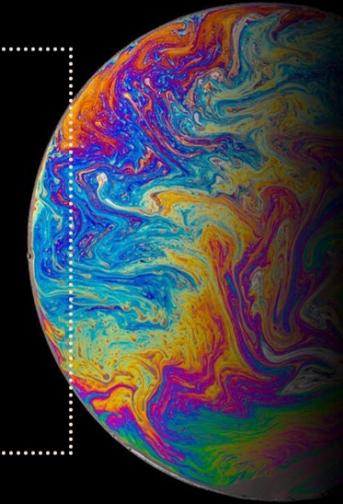


Studying biological innovations
across eons



Biology &
geochemistry
of Earth's history

Life's metal
requirements



Life as we
don't know it

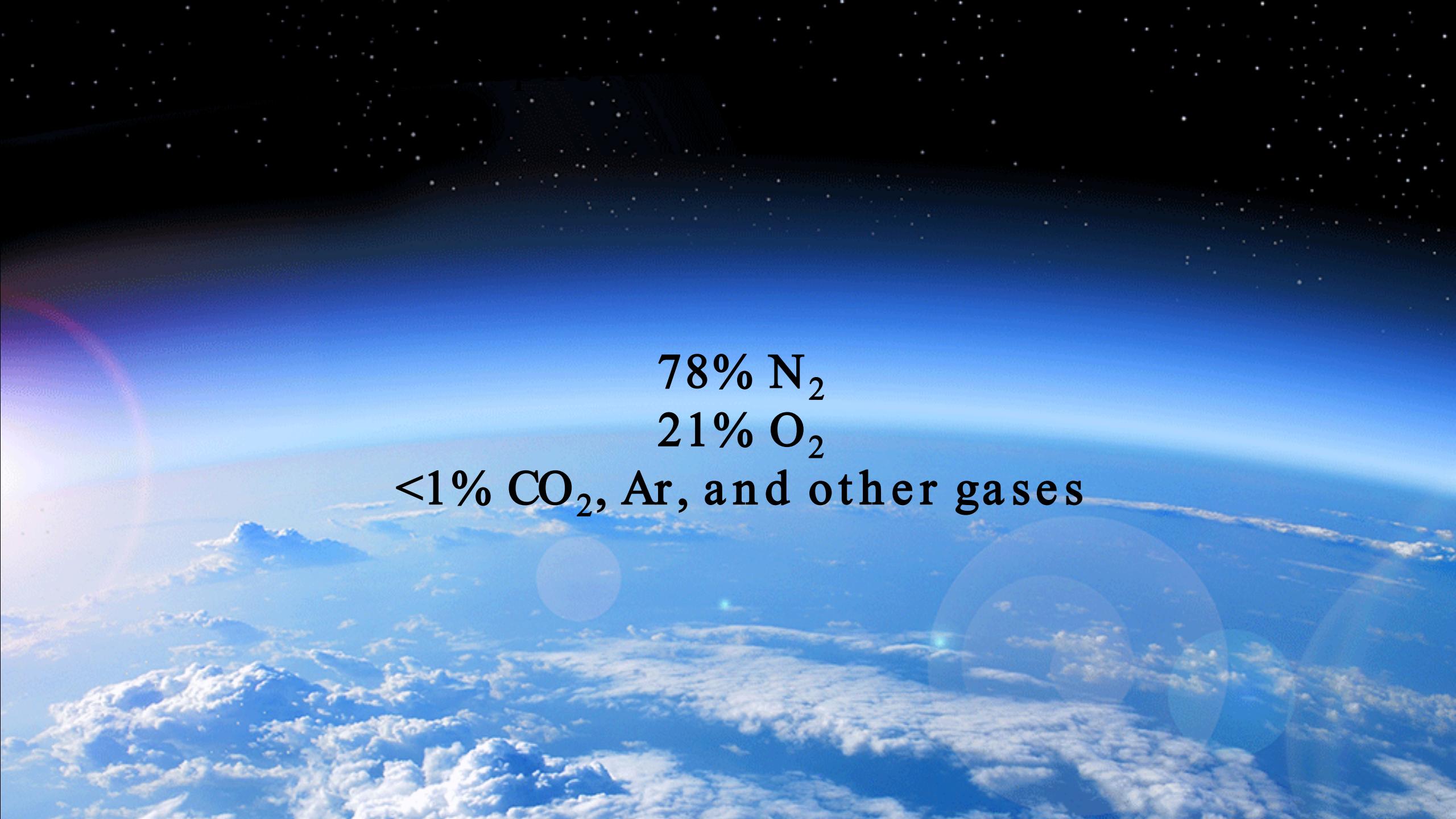


Meet the MUSE team



WISCONSIN
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

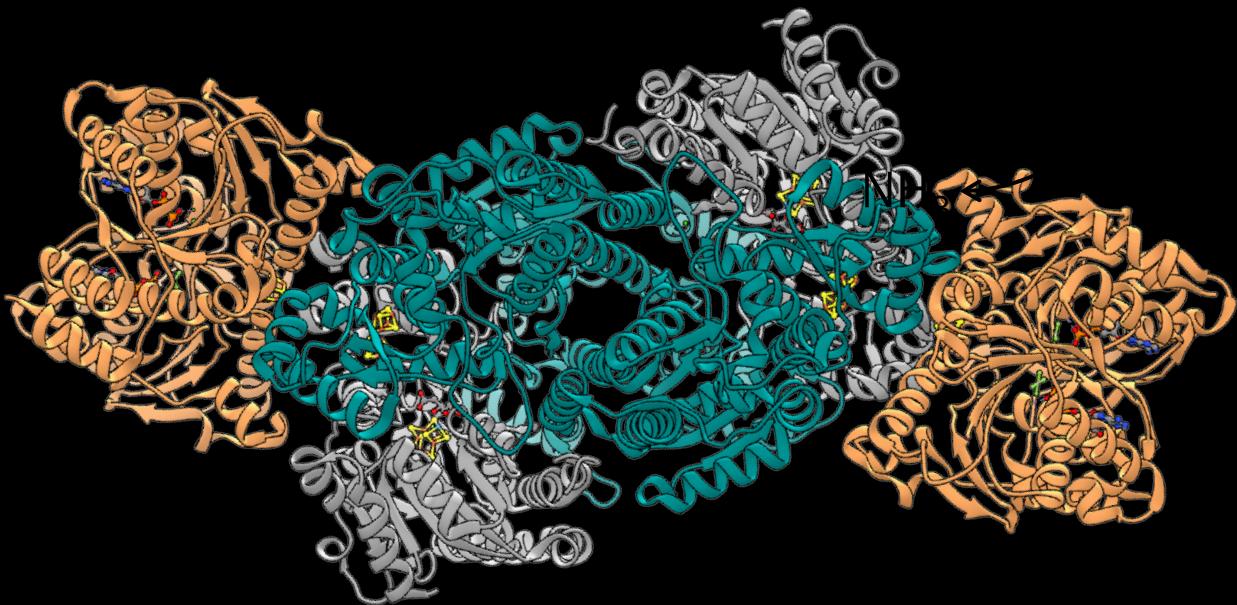




78% N_2
21% O_2
<1% CO_2 , Ar, and other gases

Nitrogenase

Life's only trick to convert atmospheric nitrogen to bioavailable ammonia

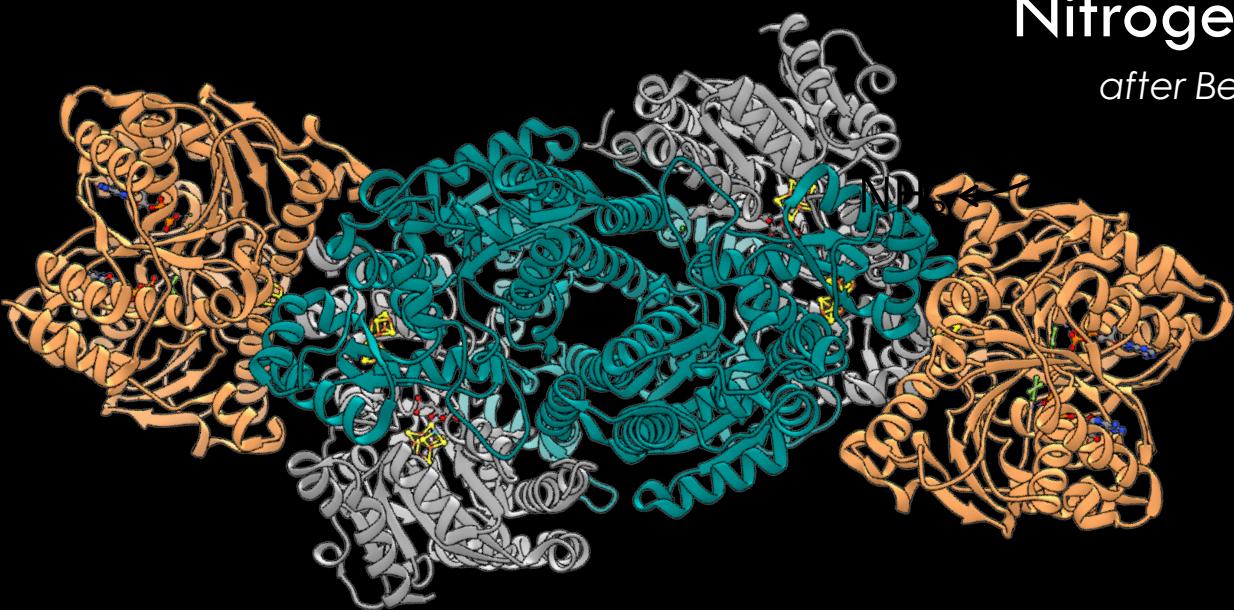


Life depends on nitrogen, nitrogenase has been a core feature of the Earth biosphere for billions of years.



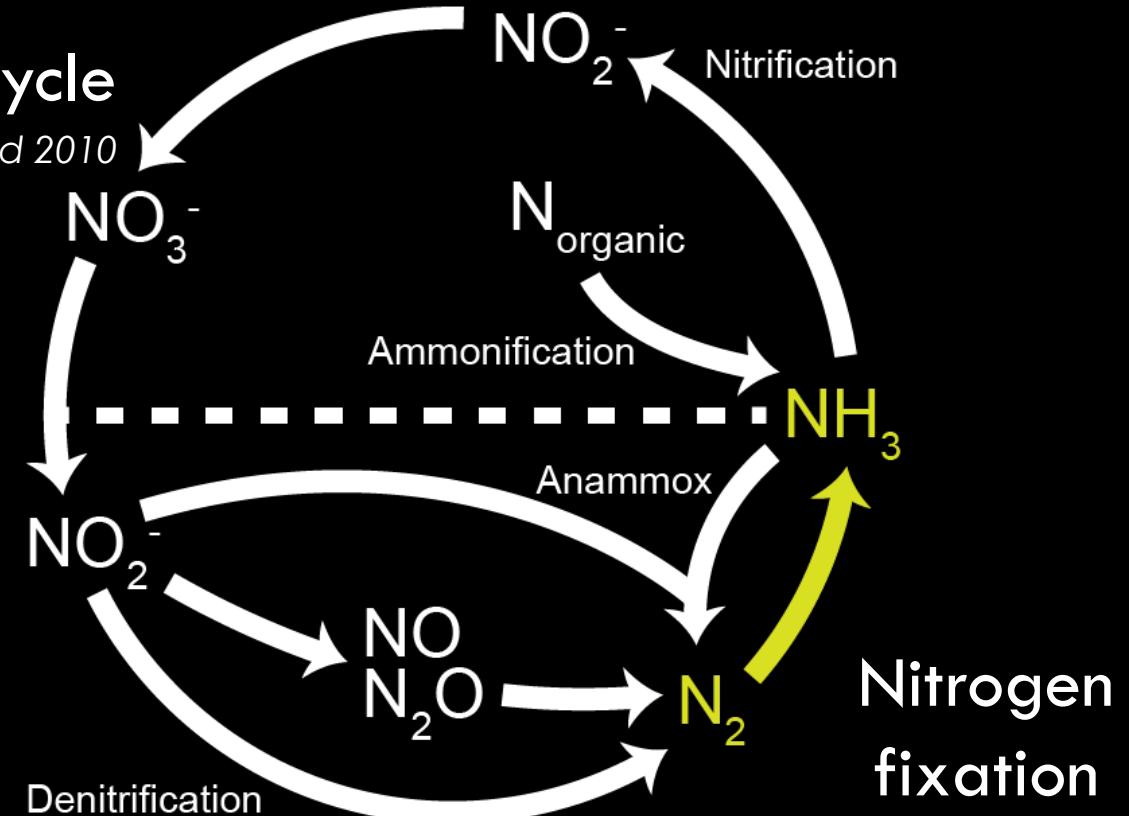
Nitrogenase

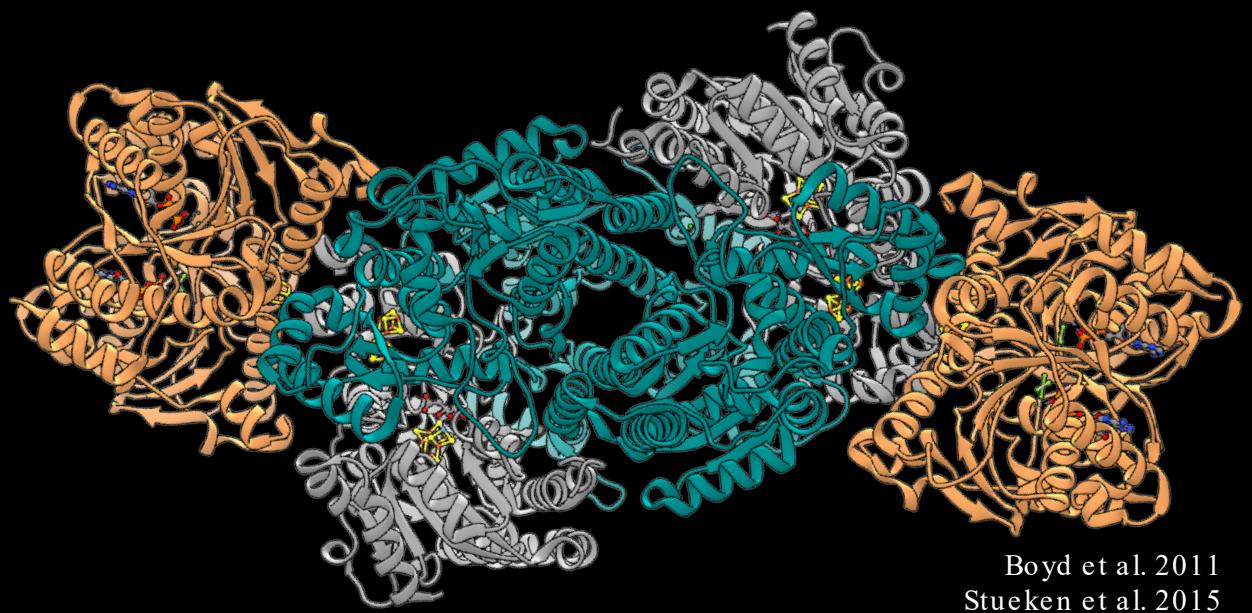
Life's only trick to convert atmospheric nitrogen to bioavailable ammonia



Nitrogen Cycle

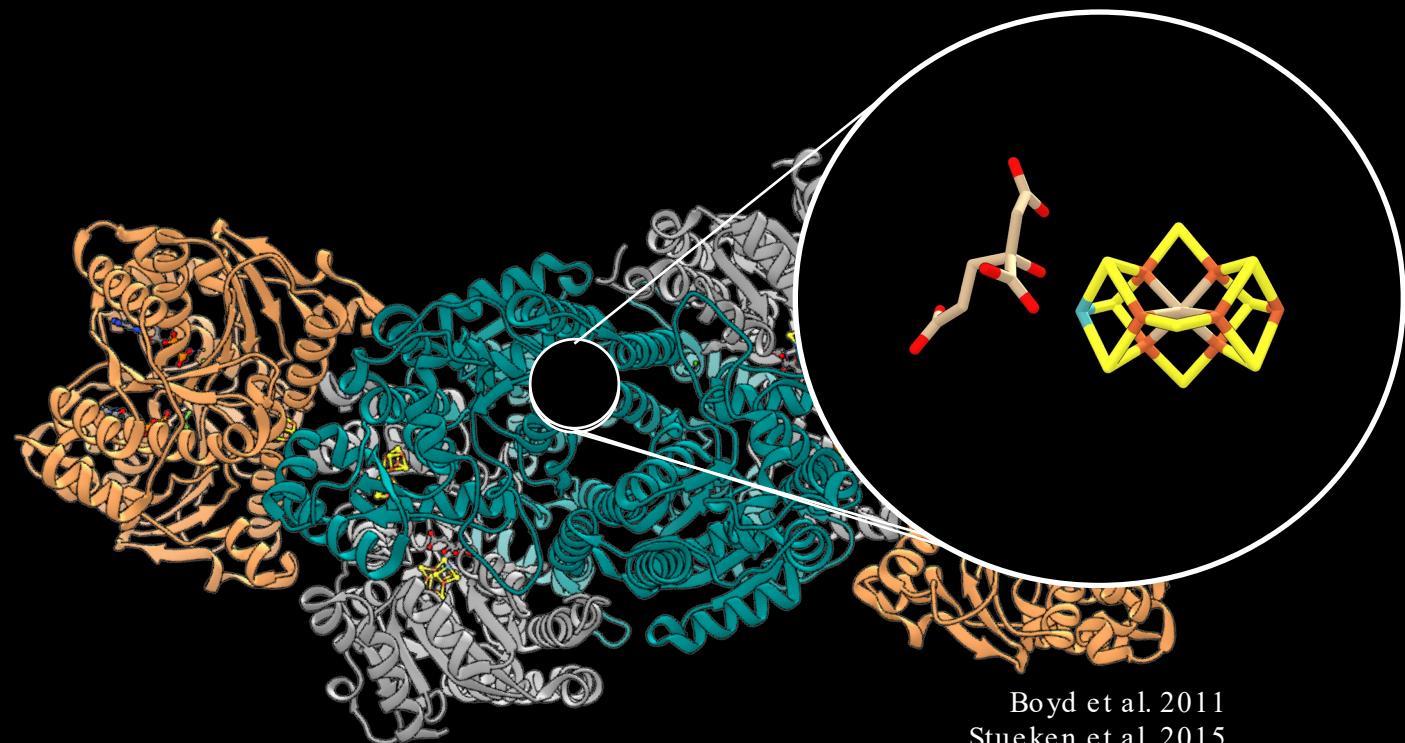
after Bernhard 2010





Boyd et al. 2011
Stueken et al. 2015
Garcia et al. 2020





Life depends on nitrogenase,
nitrogenase depends on
Molybdenum!



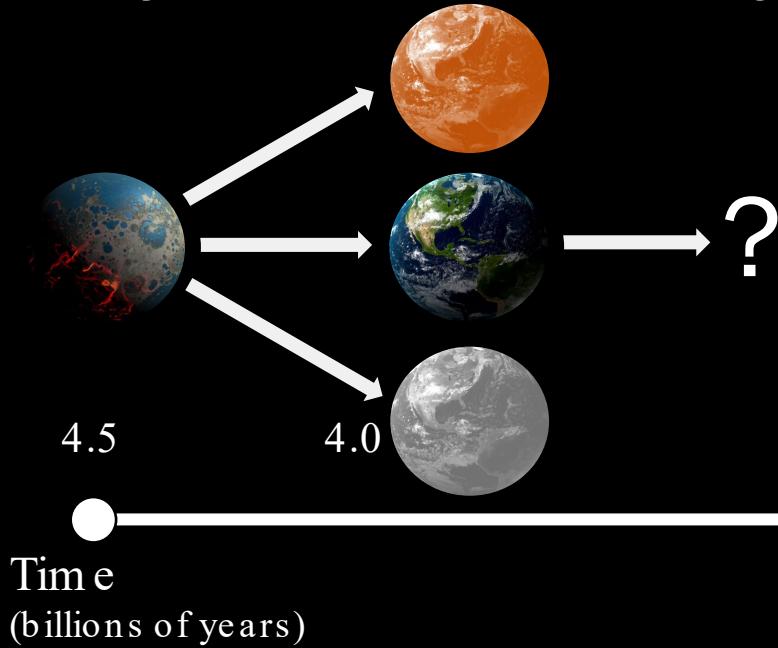
Life as we know it requires nitrogen, but how does our understanding of the N cycle inform our search for life in the universe?

In order to understand the evolution of the nitrogen cycle, we need to understand the planetary conditions that gave rise to biological nitrogen fixation.



Nitrogenase evolution: Seeking guidance from Earth history

A case for ‘planetary microbiology’



Mo-dependence likely evolved under a low Mo but high Fe ocean.
Why?

Marine Mo ↑

Marine Fe ↓

Anbar and Knoll

Questions for biological N-cycle evolution:

- How have changes in abiotic/biotic nutrient cycling influenced the evolution of these enzymes?

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- What drives the selection of their metal cofactors as well as other incorporated elements?
 - i.e., metal abundances, nutrient limitation/minimums, environmental conditions, ecological processes, etc.

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- What gaps in knowledge might there be in both the geologic and biological record that need to be addressed?
 - Ex. Isotope fractionation data from non-model organisms, undiscovered N-cycle pathways/enzymes, etc.

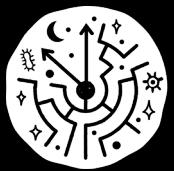
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- What are the observable signatures of this phenomenon?

Earth's past biology offers a unique opportunity. The early Earth is a natural laboratory to identify potential biosignatures in the context of their environment.

Run the 'what if' experiment

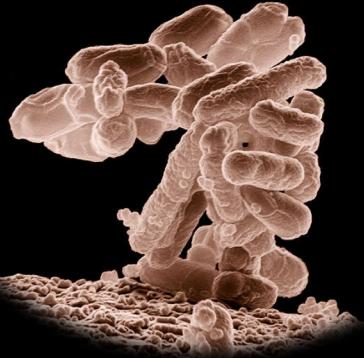




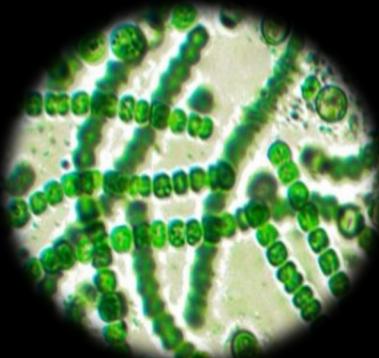
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“Planetary Microbiology”

Microbes



E. coli



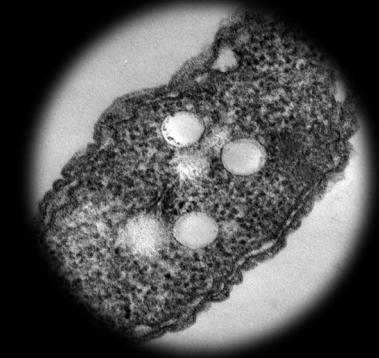
S. elongatus



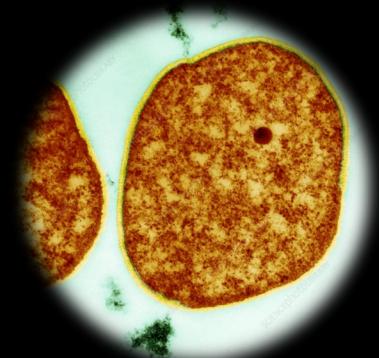
A. vinelandii



R. palustris



K. variicola

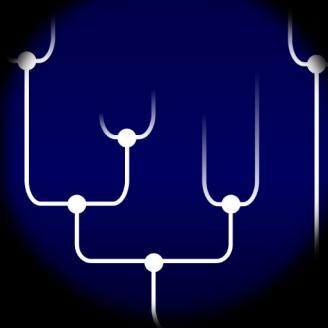


Sulfolobus archaea

We have several questions that we can answer with modern tools in biology

Such as CRISPR, computational biology, AI predictions, laboratory evolution, etc.

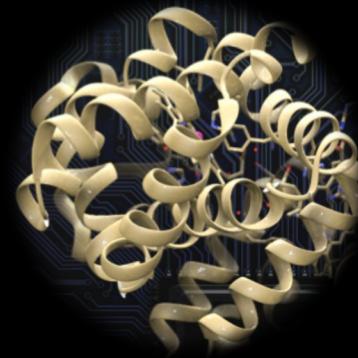
First question: How did nitrogenase evolve?



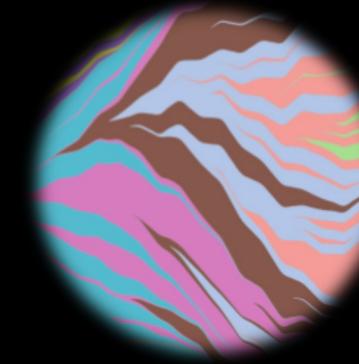
Ancestral
reconstruction



Synthetic
biology



Protein
biochemistry



Experimental
evolution

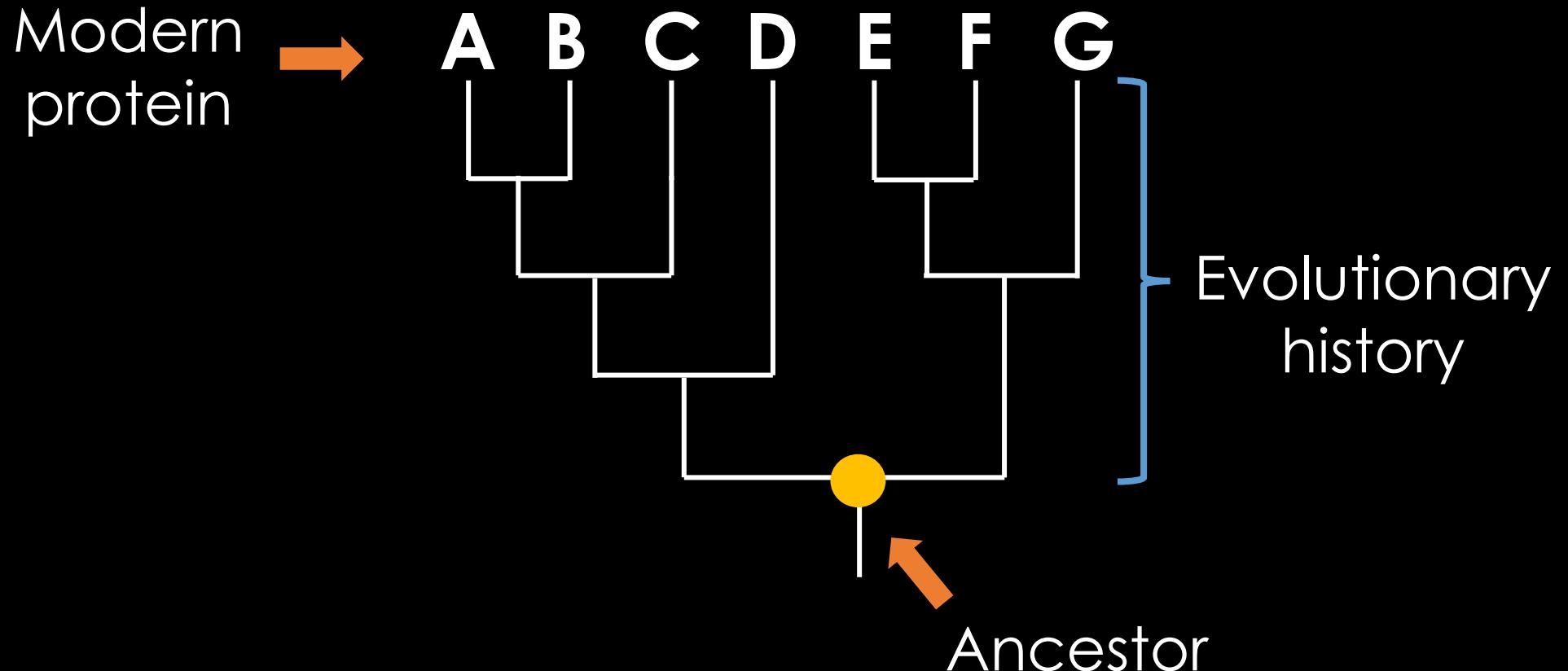


Machine
learning



Isotope
geochemistry

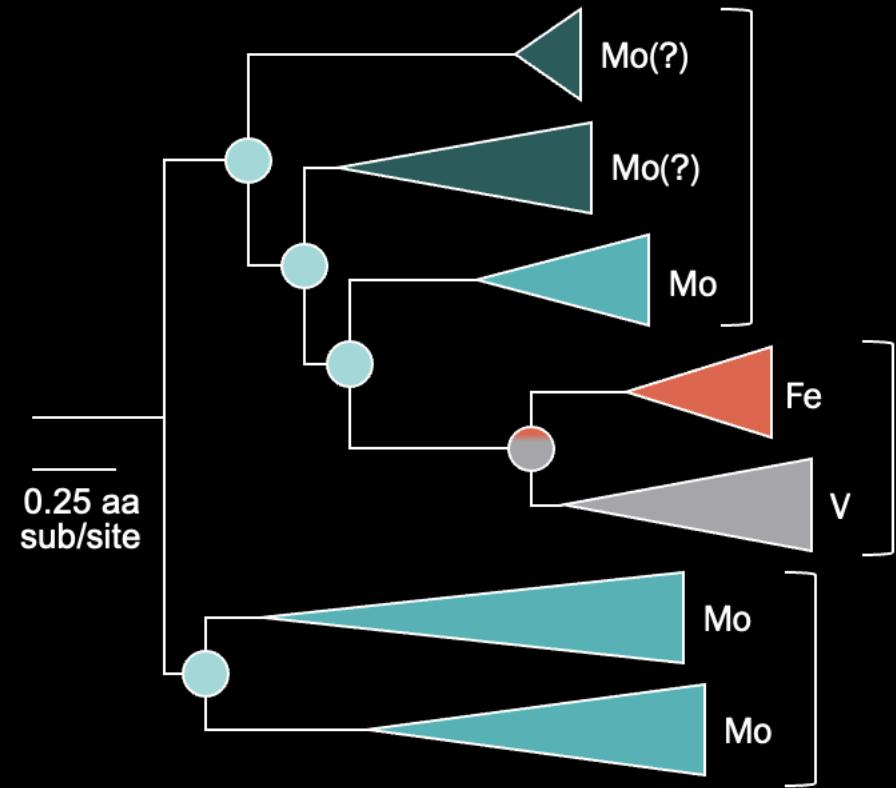
Ancient DNA reconstruction



Reprogram cells to generate extinct biosignatures

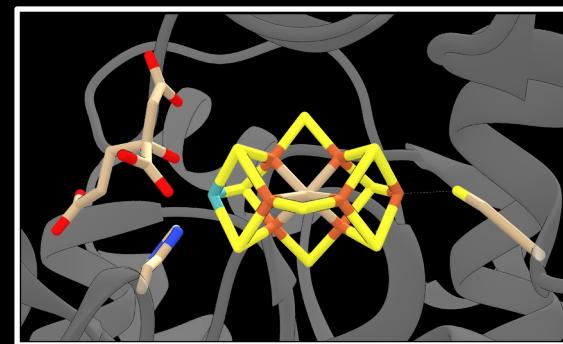


Nitrogenase protein phylogeny



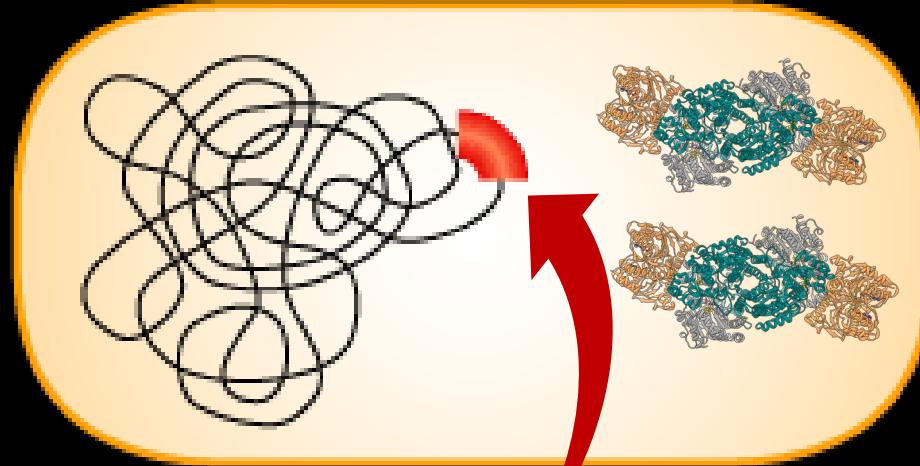
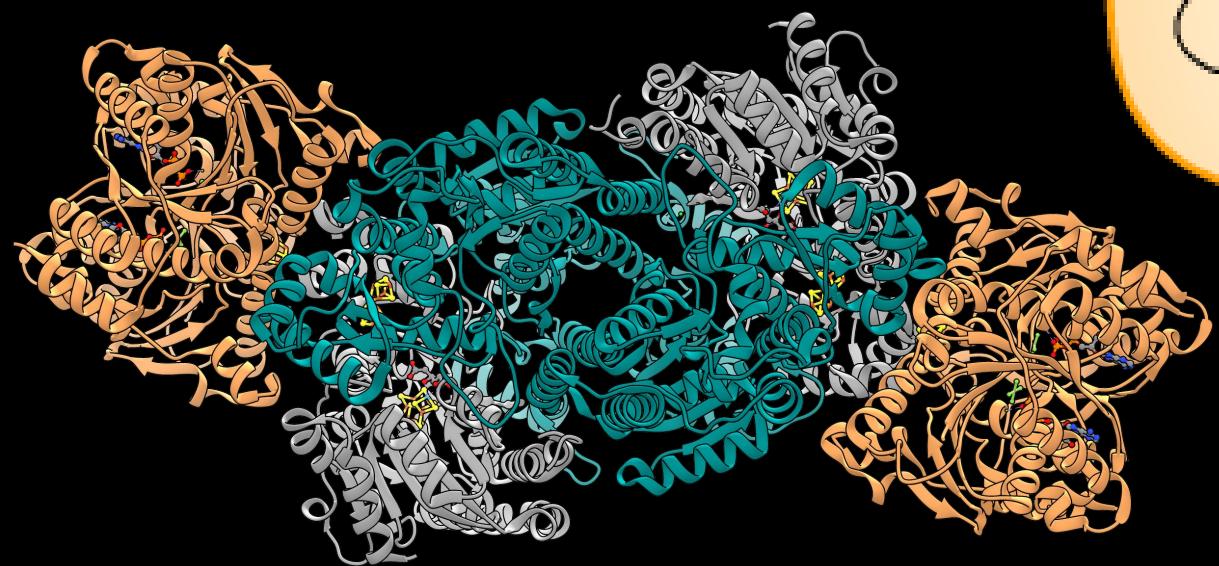
*colored by experimentally determined or computationally inferred metal dependence

- Built machine learning models to infer ancient protein and metabolism & properties



Active-site amino acids
tuned to cofactor
metal composition

Generate new experimental system



A. vinelandii



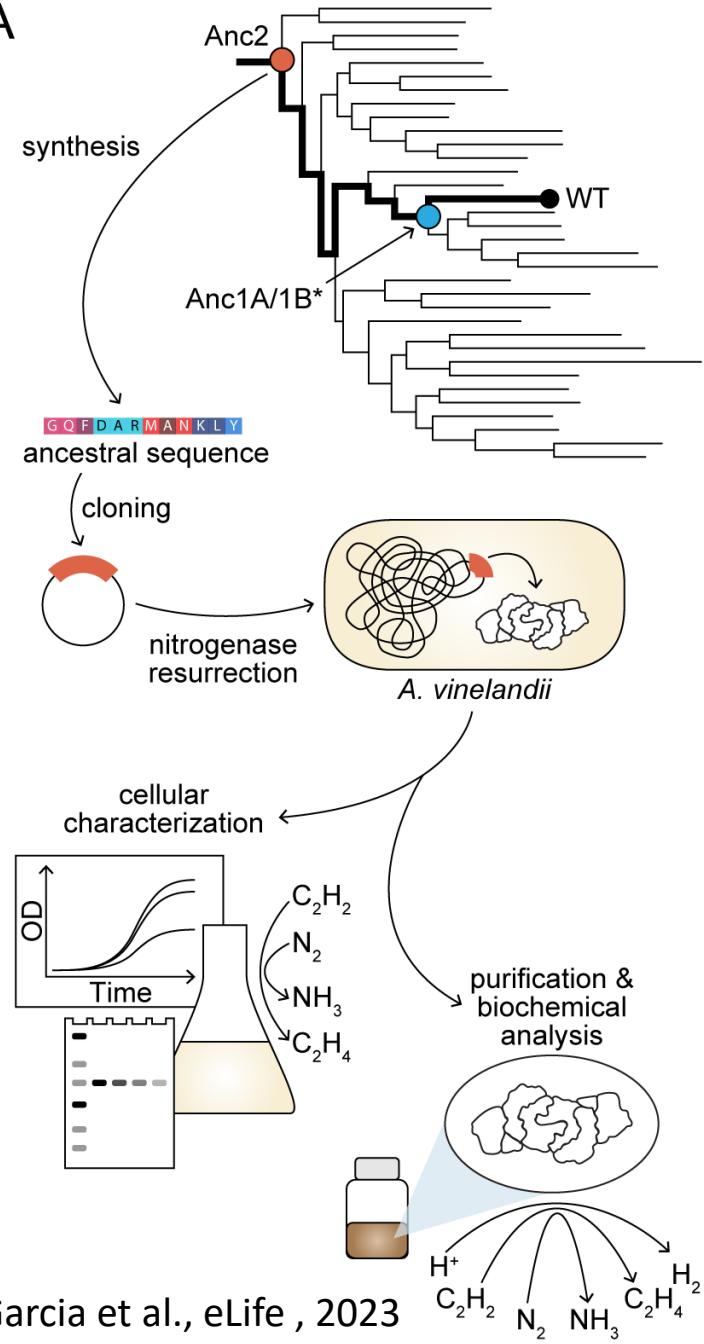
Engineer ancient DNA in microbes

Kacar et al., mBio, 2017

Venkataram et al., PNAS, 2020

Garcia et al., eLife, 2023

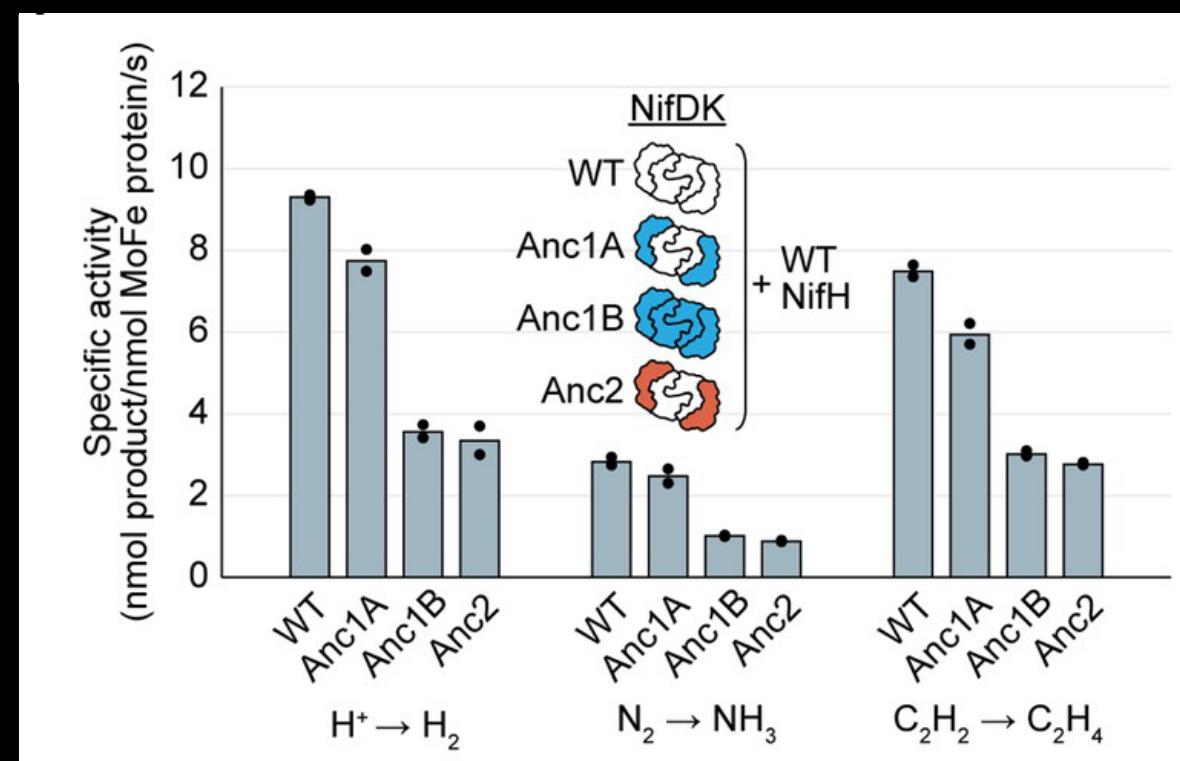
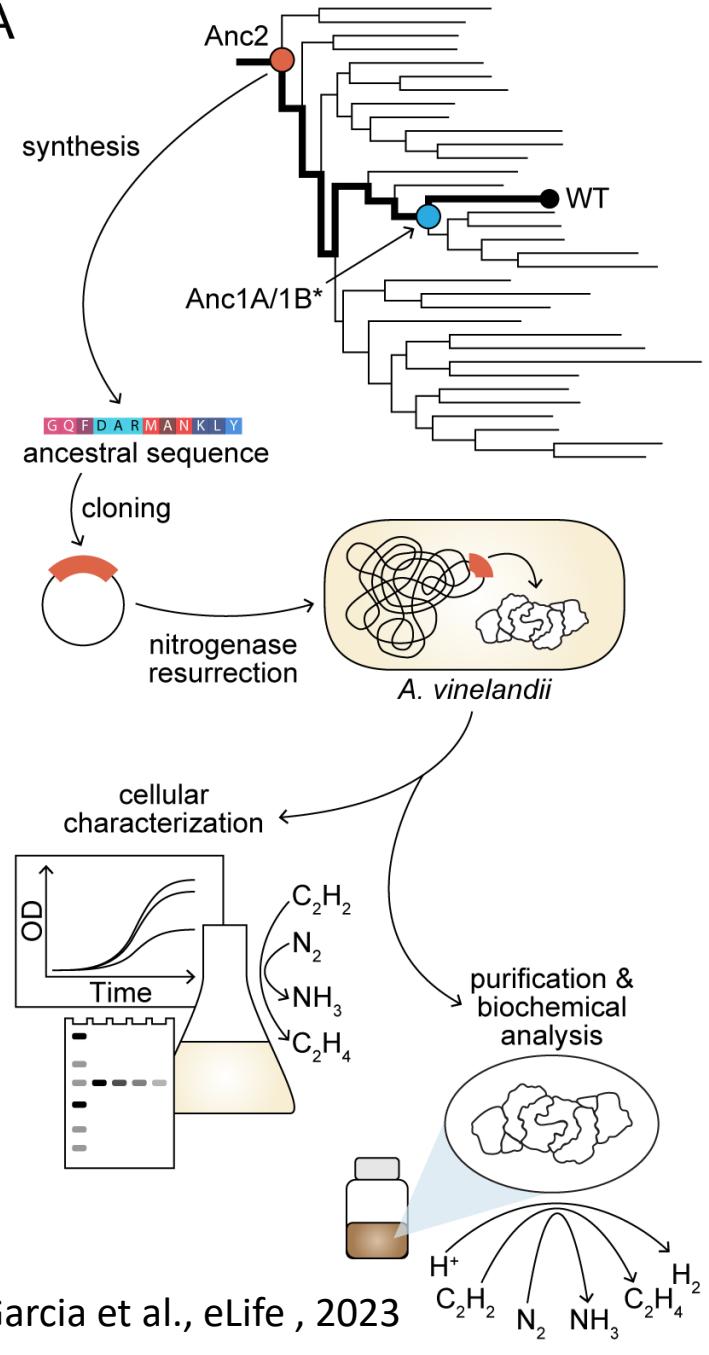
Amanda Garcia (NPP)

A

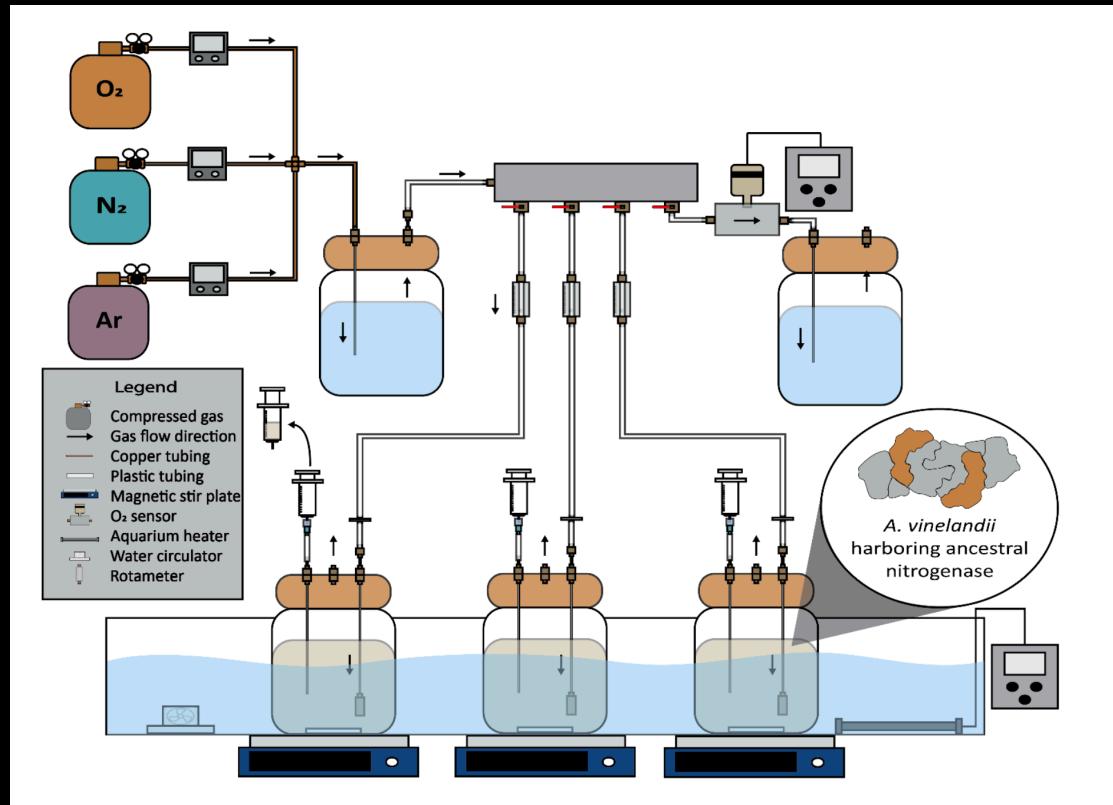
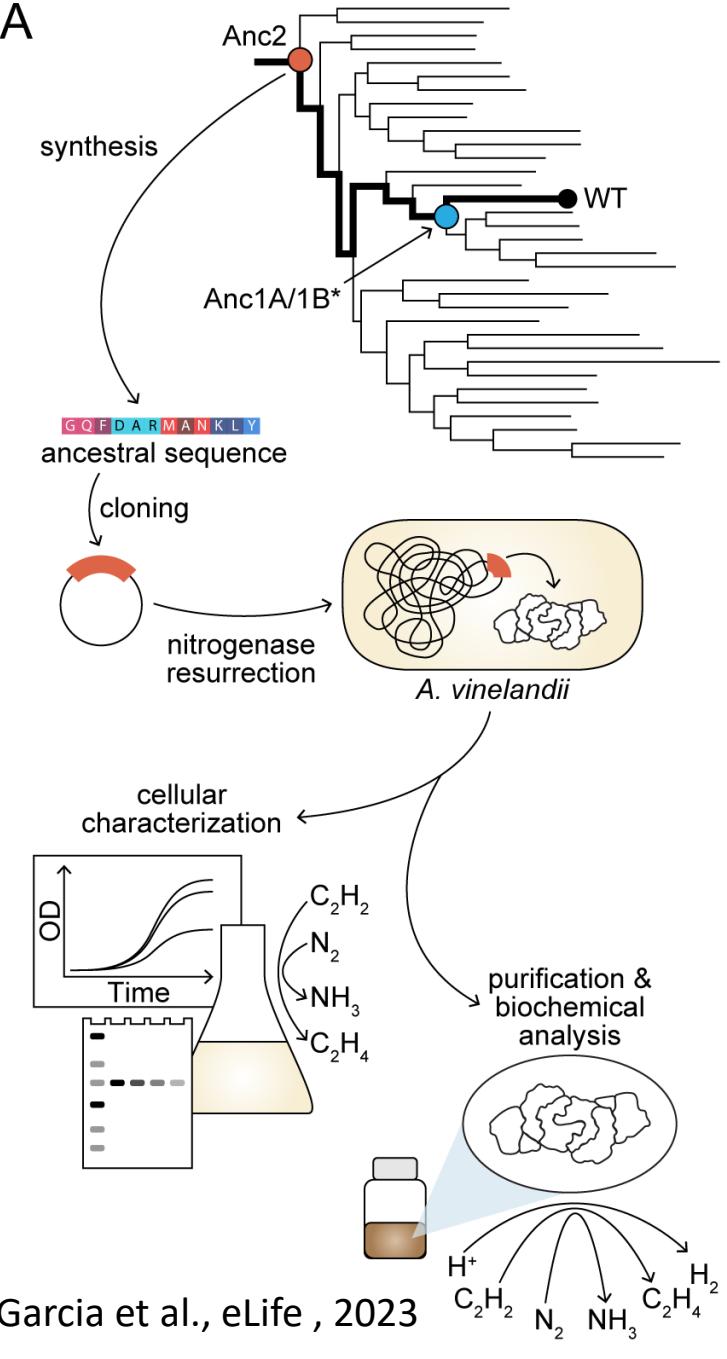
Environmental pressures Evolutionary opportunities
Bridging enzymes to ecosystems & observables



A



- Generate ancient metabolisms in the lab:
 - Despite scarcity, early nitrogenases preferred Mo
 - Study and evolve them under ancient Earth conditions
 - Laboratory resurrection of ancient isotope signatures

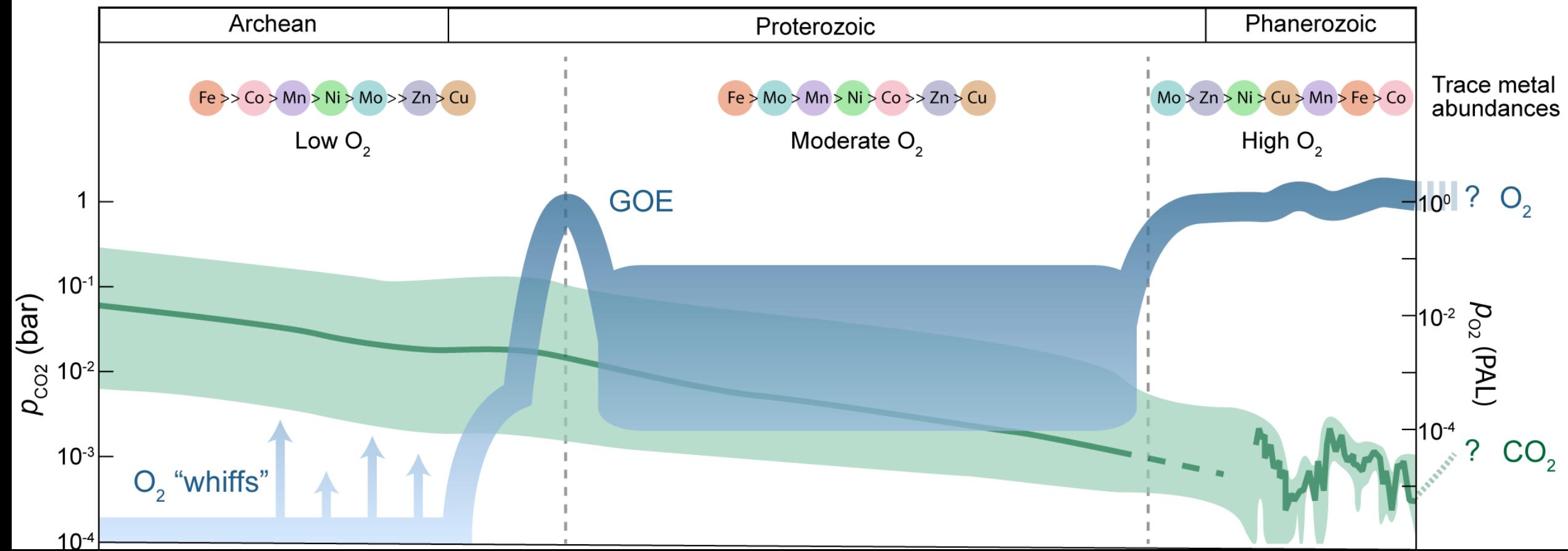
A

Rivier et al., Spectrum, 2023
Rucker et al., Trends in Micro, 2023

- We simulate ancient & alien Earth conditions in the laboratory to generate a high-throughput biosignature library



Metal composition evolved across geologic time



Rucker and Kaçar, 2023

Presenting new analyses of nutrient transition metals
in seafloor vent fluids from the iconic Lost City
Hydrothermal Field (LCHF)

We have calculated the amounts of metals that are
necessary to sustain life
(including Ni, Mo, Mn, Fe, Co, Cd, W)

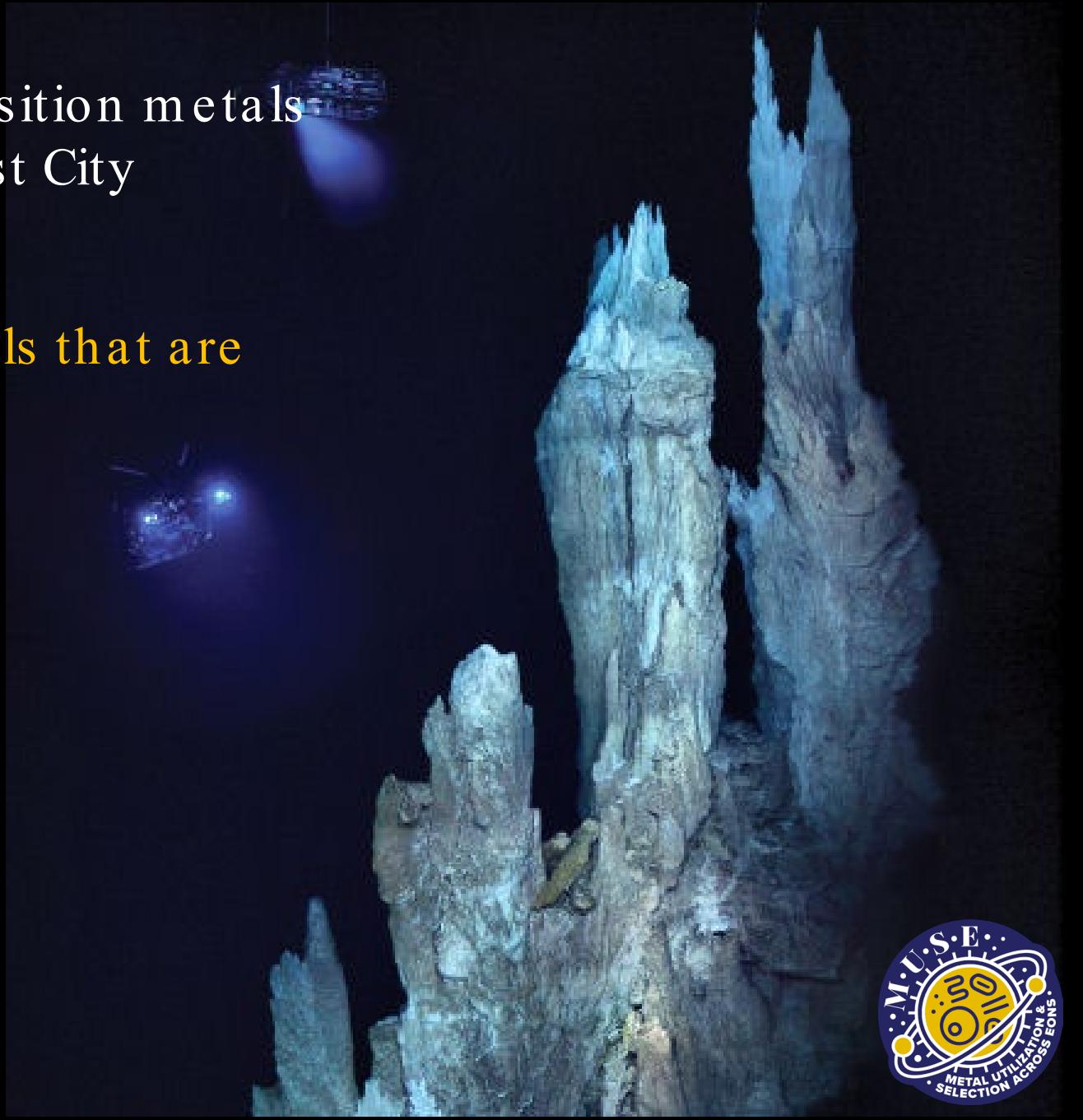
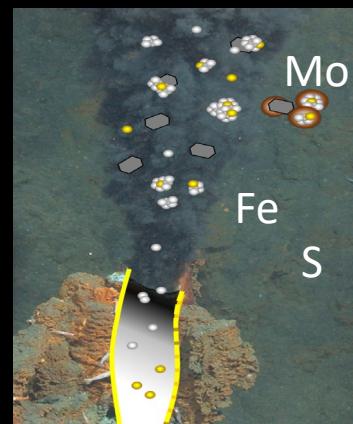
Guy Evans et al.



Geochimica et
Cosmochimica Acta
JOURNAL OF THE GEOCHEMICAL SOCIETY
AND THE METEORITICAL SOCIETY

ISSN 0016-7037
Volume 351
June 15, 2023

EARTH
& PLANETARY
SCIENCE LETTERS



Recall...

Life as we know it requires nitrogen, but how does our understanding of the N cycle inform our search for life in the universe?



Looking for life in all the wrong (or right?) places?

We cannot put a lab on a spacecraft
but we can distill that to a set of
observables that can be measurable
using a limited set of tools



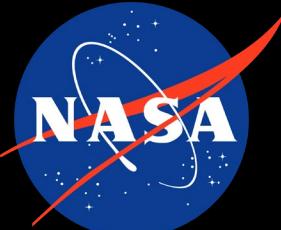
Molybdenum



Iron



Vanadium



Looking for life in all the wrong (or right?) places?

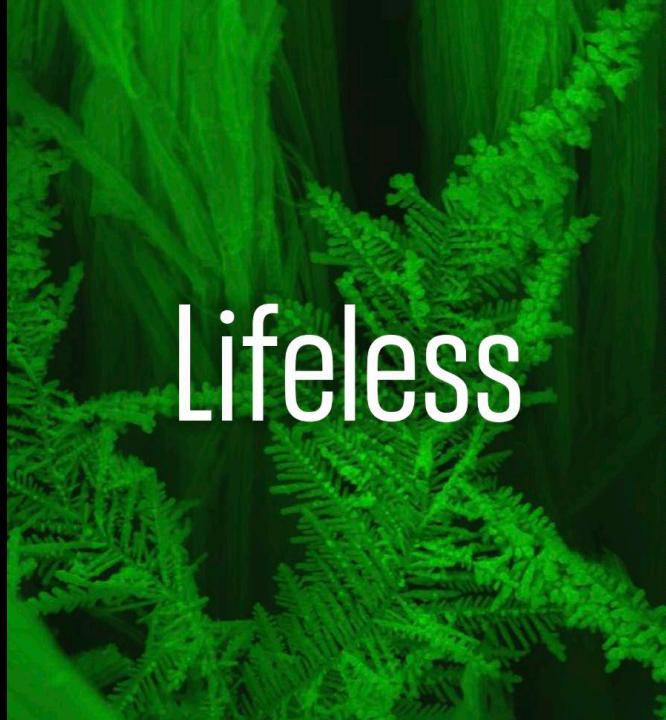
We are recreating ancient Earth in the lab.

Can this tell us if Mars' past was alive or dead?

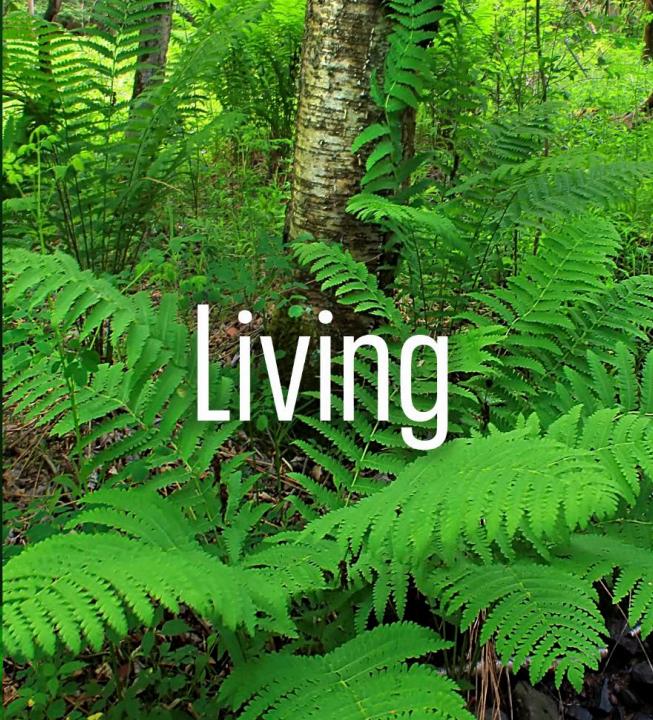
Goals:

- develop the techniques so that NASA astronauts can recognize the potential for past and present life elsewhere
- support planetary scientists in assessing potential for life on icy worlds
- help place exoplanets in context with ancient and present-day Earth





Lifeless



We study which elements may produce observable signatures under a variable conditions from Mars to icy-moons.

Our goal is to help people figure out what life looks like (or not!)

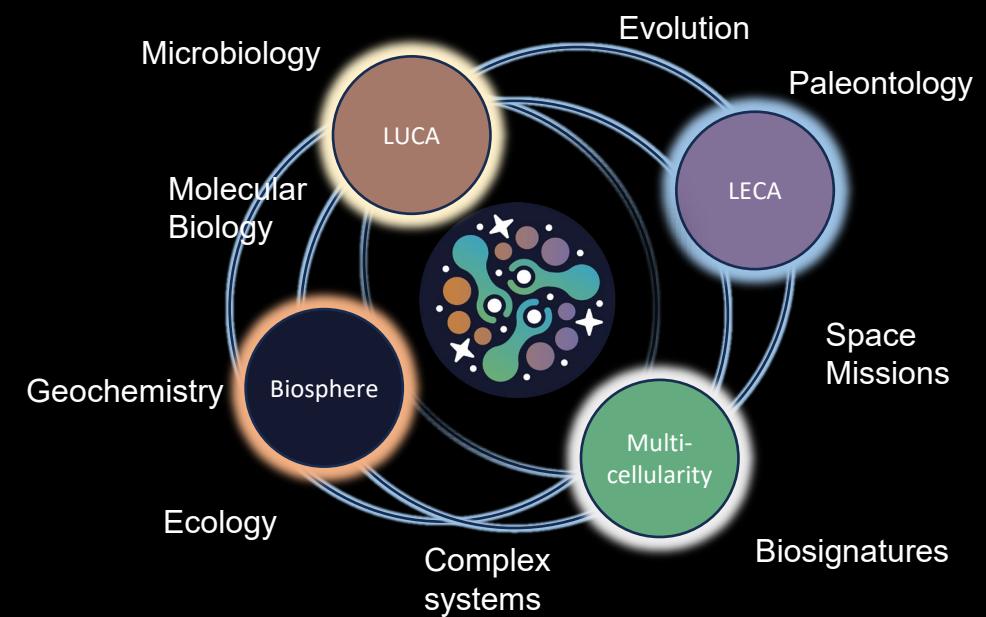


If we can tie *any* of the evolutionary singular events to the presence, absence, abundance or deficiency of elements, we might help to make this a problem that is more easily observable across interstellar distances.

Understanding life-planet co-evolution recorded in the rock record, in biodiversity, in genome databases, and modeled *in silico* or by lab proxy studies.



LIFE
FROM EARLY CELLS TO MULTICELLULARITY



A community dedicated to understanding life-planet co-evolution recorded in the rock record, in biodiversity, in genome databases, and modeled *in silico* or by lab proxy studies.

lifeRCN.org



NASA Announces New Collaboration Probing How Life Evolved From Single-Cells On Earth

Allison Gasparini Contributor 

I write about space.

Follow

May 17, 2022, 08:30am EDT

LIFE joins four other research coordination networks currently in operation under NASA's Astrobiology Program. Researchers in the other coordination networks are currently investigating scientific questions pertaining to ocean worlds, planets with the potential to harbor life, prebiotic chemistry, and detecting signatures of life.

The coming decades will mark an increasingly dedicated search for habitable planets. The recently launched James Webb Space Telescope will be able to look for the chemicals that make up life in the atmospheres of planets that orbit in other star systems. A six-meter infrared optical and ultraviolet light telescope is on the top of the recommended projects for astronomers. Aimed for launch in the 2040s, the telescope would look for signs of life in faraway atmospheres in even more detail.

Kaçar hopes LIFE inspires early career researchers and students studying science to join in on the worldwide effort to understand life's evolution.

"There's a place for everybody here," she said. "As long as you're fascinated by life, there are many different ways to chase these questions and we want everyone to be excited and join us in this effort."

Forbes



LIFE

FROM EARLY CELLS TO MULTICELLULARITY

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Co-Leads

- Mary Droser, UC-Riverside
- Betül Kaçar, UW-Madison,
- Frank Rosenzweig, GTech
- Ariel Anbar, ASU

Early Career Committee

- Christina Buffo, Georgia Institute of Technology
- Jaime Cordova, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Bruno Cuevas-Zuviría, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Ethan Edmans, Arizona State University
- Brandon Hasty, Arizona State University
- Adam Hoffman, University of California, Riverside
- Charles Ross Lindsey, Georgia Institute of Technology
- Kathryn Rico, Arizona State University
- Rachel Surprenant, University of California, Rivers

Steering Committee

- Tom Boothby, University of Wyoming
- Don Burke-Aguero, University of Missouri
- Shelley Copley, University of Colorado-Boulder
- Mark Ditzler, NASA Ames Research Center
- Ben Gill, University of Vermont
- Trinity Hamilton, University Minnesota
- Tim Lyons, University of California, Riverside
- Niki Parenteau, NASA Ames Research Center
- Daniel Stolper, University of California, Berkeley
- Cynthia Silviera, University of Miami
- Steve Vance, NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory



Online community seminars and workshops



LIFE
FROM EARLY CELLS TO MULTICELLULARITY

LIFE is a network of astrobiologists focused on the coevolution of Earth and life. Together, we explore ways to advance this science, and its implications for the search for life on other worlds.



lifercn.org

 @LIFE_RCN

 youtube.com/@LIFE-RCN



LIFE

FROM EARLY CELLS TO MULTICELLULARITY

1st LIFE Workshop

Nitrogen Cycling Across Planetary Scales

October 18, 20, 2023

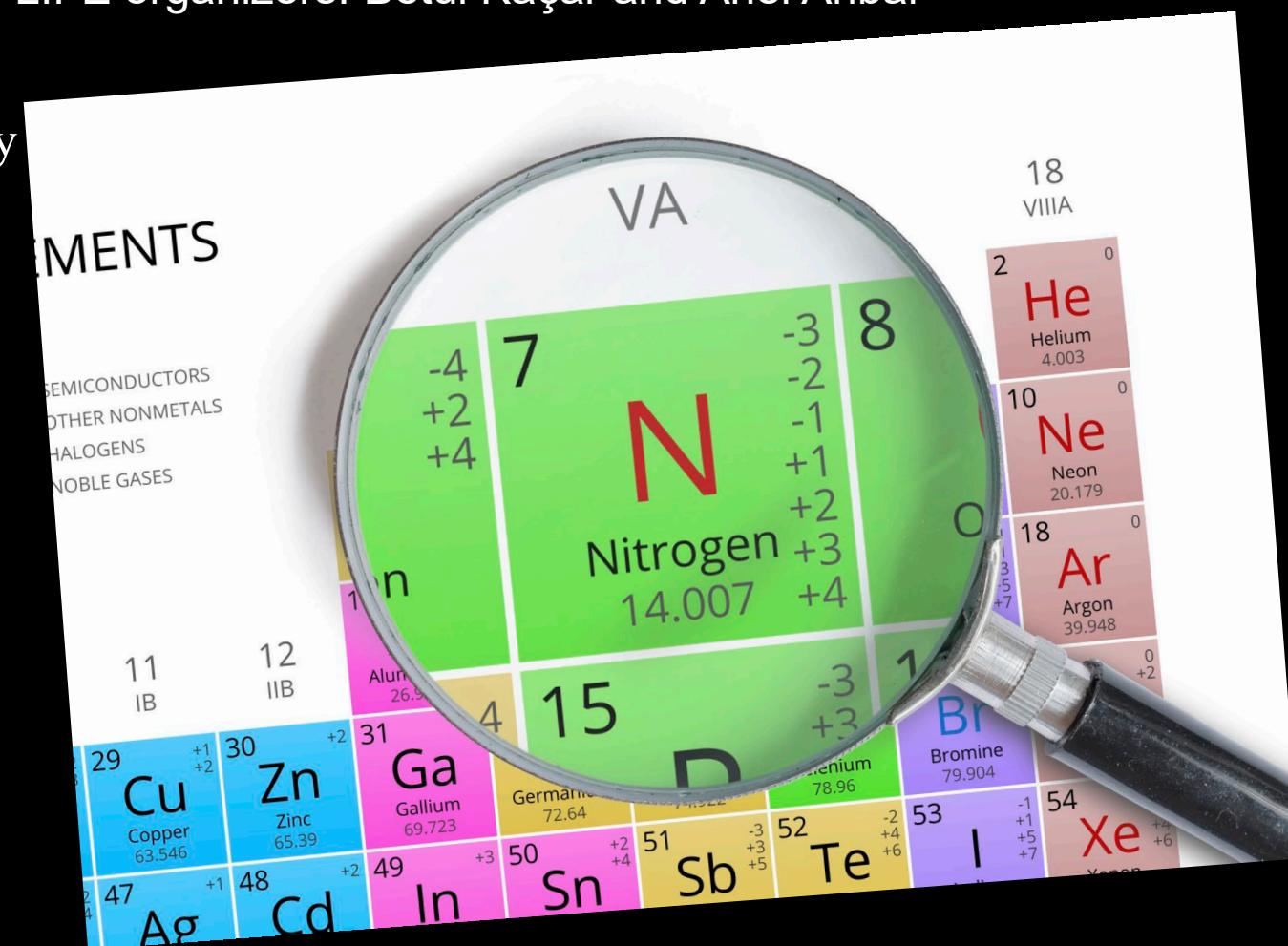
Lead Organizers: Eva Stueeken (St. Andrews Univ) & Ben Johnson (Iowa State)

LIFE organizers: Betül Kaçar and Ariel Anbar

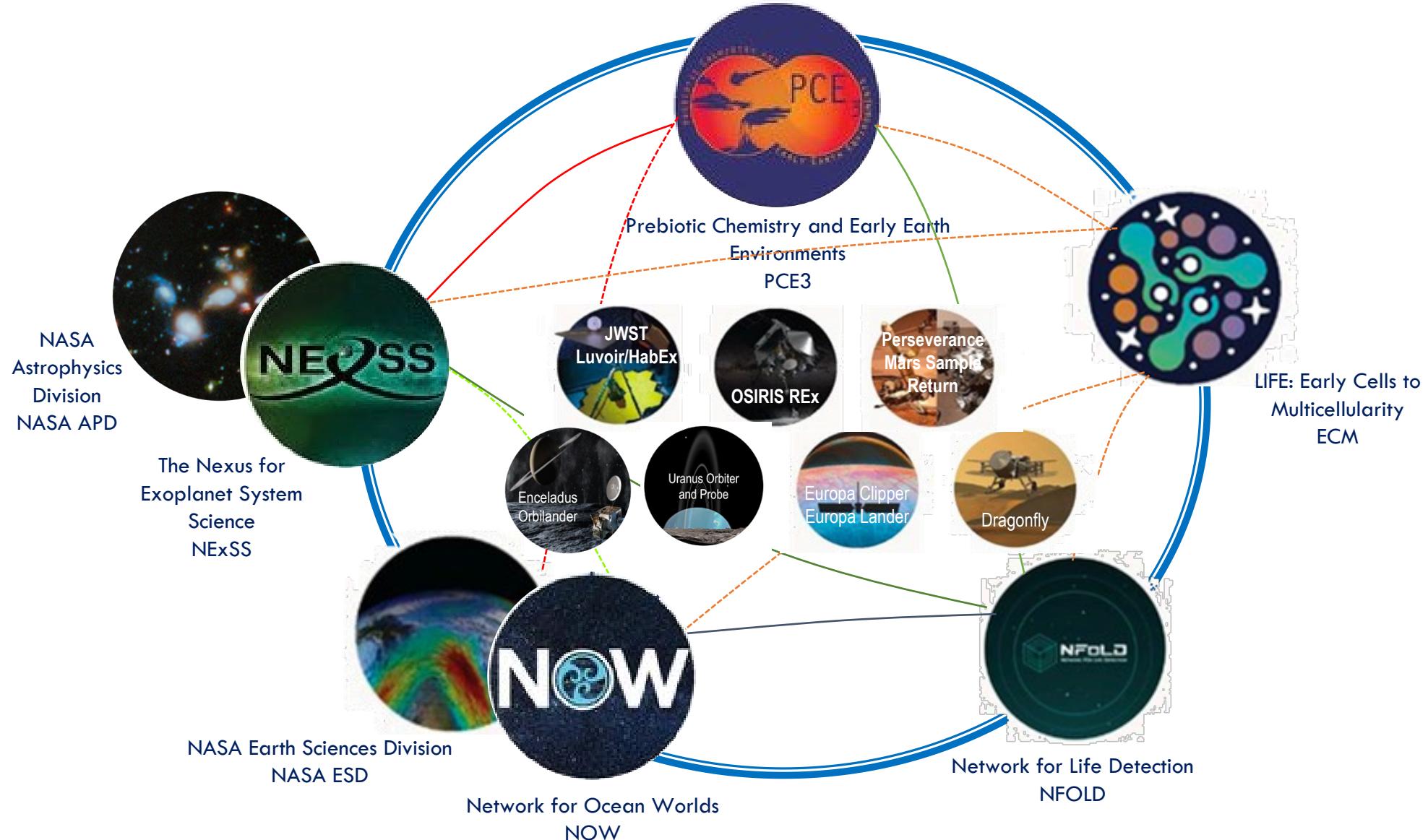
This workshop brought together a wide variety of scientists, including biologists, geologists, astronomers, and chemists to build connections and enhance understanding of the role of nitrogen in the search for life.

- 170 participants
- Over 8 countries
- 12 presenters, 4 panelists
- 1 white paper, 1 review paper

“The cosmic importance of nitrogen”



A connected network of networks – supporting current NASA Mission Science



Our goal is to help NASA and its missions to correctly assess the potential for past or present life



No single 'smoking gun' of biological presence

Strongest arguments will involve a mix of multiple, complementary biosignatures that reinforce a consistent view of biological impact.

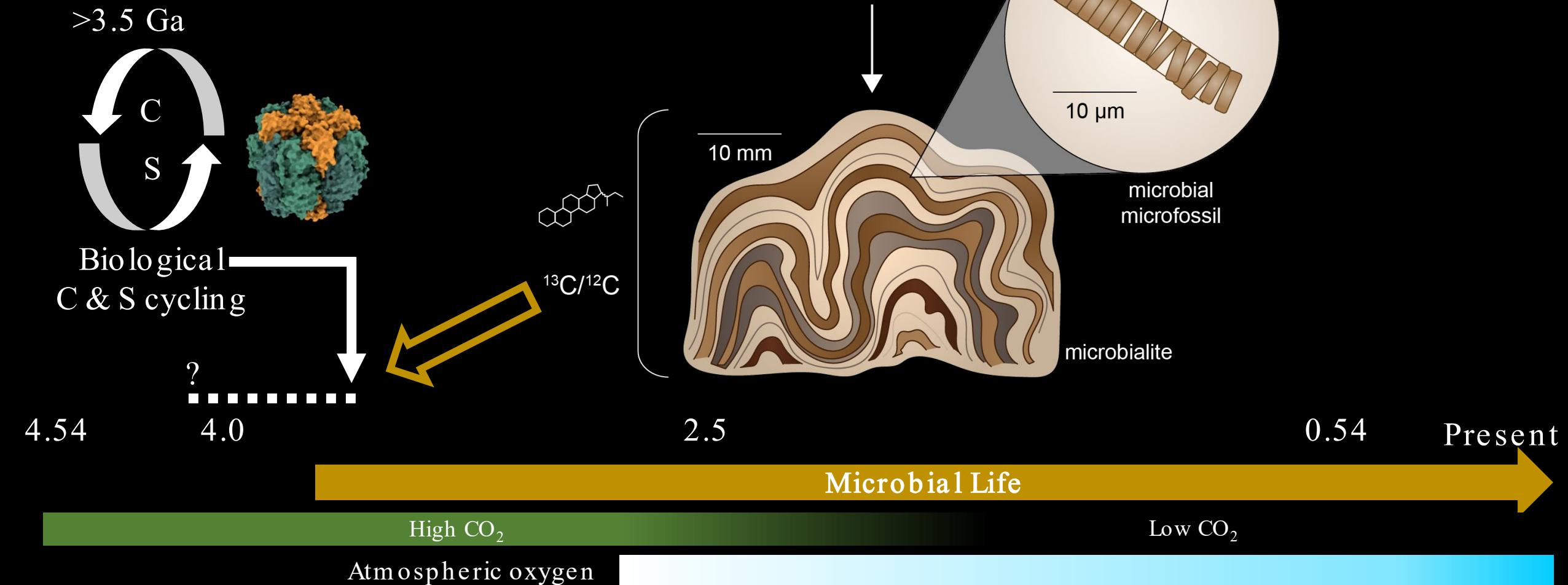






Thank you!

Rebuilding and recreating ancient biosignatures in the laboratory

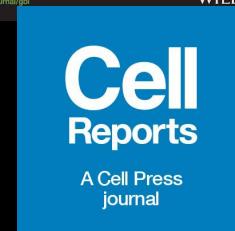
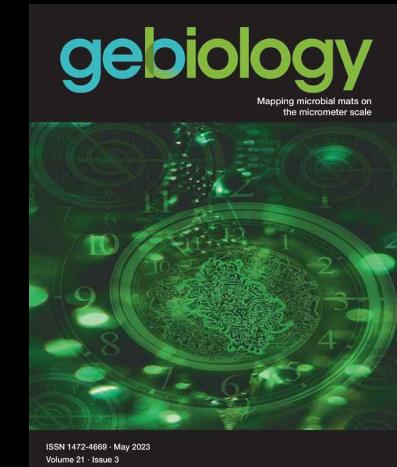
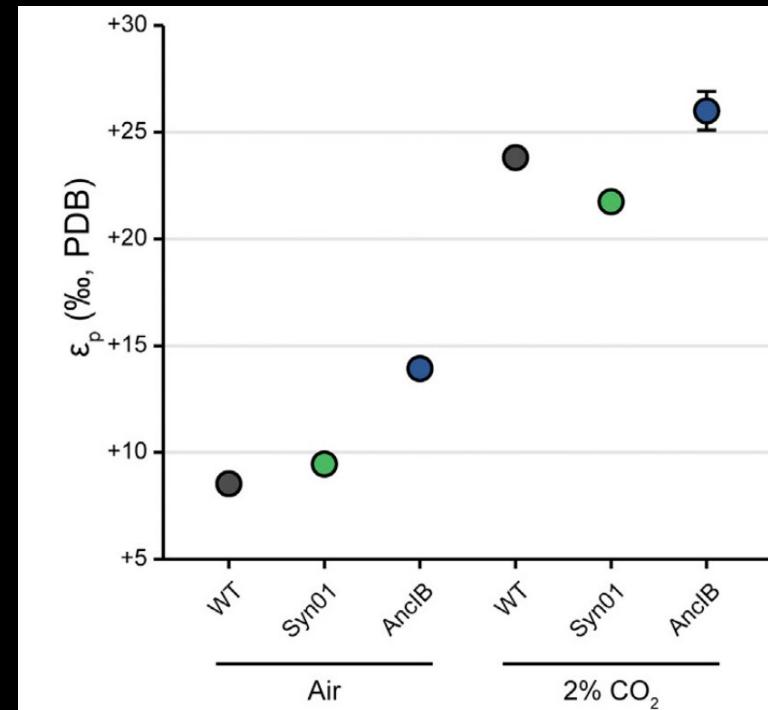
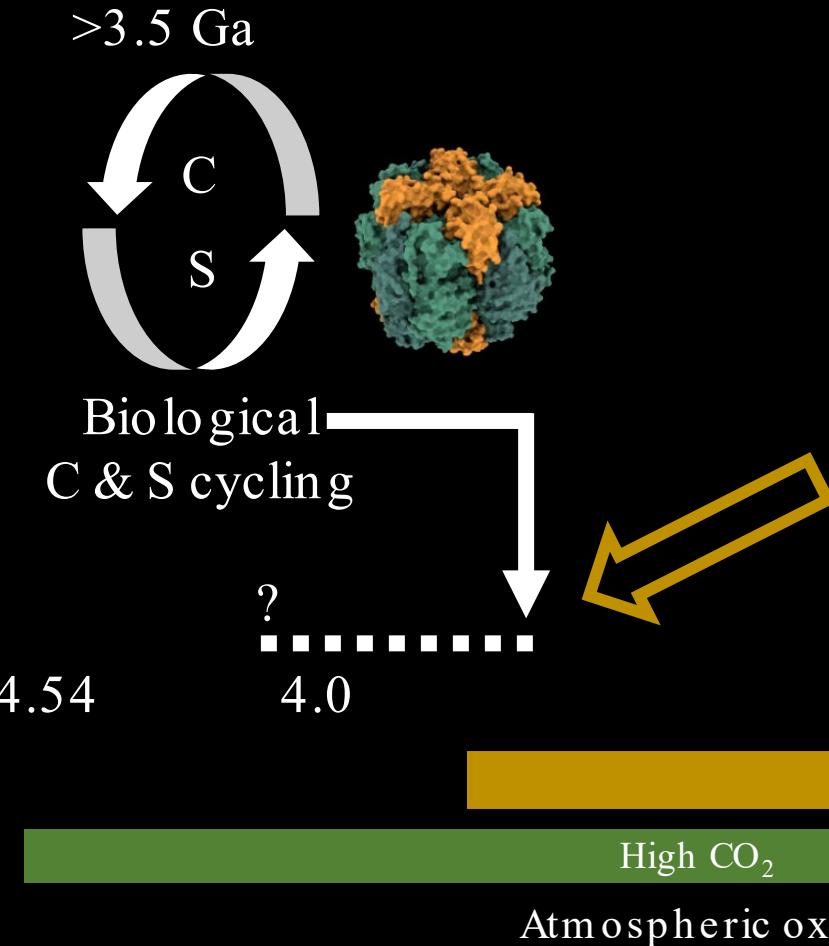


Rebuilding and recreating ancient biosignatures in the laboratory

ORIGINAL ARTICLE |  Open Access |  

Constraining the timing of the Great Oxidation Event within the Rubisco phylogenetic tree

Laboratory resurrection of ancient biosignatures
(Kedzior, 2022)



Kedzior et al., Cell Reports, 2022
Garcia et al., Geobiology, 2023
Kacar et al., ISME J, 2021

Reviewed 200-year-old literature. Reporting 270 combinations of molecules across the periodic table.

The data will be used in laboratory experiments simulating multiple planetary conditions, providing insight into how and where these ingredients could form complex cycles.

¹ H	Cmp.: 8	Brd.: 26
³ Li	Cmp.: 4	Be
¹² Na	Cmp.: 12	Mg
¹⁹ K	Cmp.: 26	Ca
³⁷ Rb	Cmp.: 38	Sr
⁵⁵ Cs	Cmp.: 56	Ba
⁸⁷ Rb	Cmp.: 88	Ac

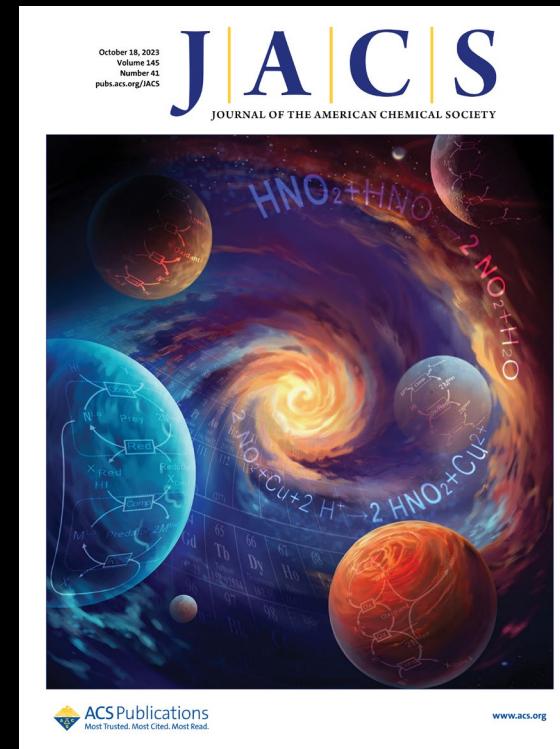
Supporting Information 4: Examples of Comproportionation-based Autocatalytic Cycles (interactive version)

Cmp.: Count of CompACs that are compatible with the common definition of comproportionation, corresponding to Table S1.

Brd.: Count of Broad-sense CompACs that affect the element and are only compatible with the rare definition of comproportionation, corresponding to Table S2; note that for a Broad-sense CompAC, any element that is involved in an autocatalyst is considered affected by this Broad-sense CompAC.

²¹ Sc	²² Ti	²³ V	²⁴ Cr	²⁵ Mn	²⁶ Fe	²⁷ Co	²⁸ Ni	²⁹ Cu	³⁰ Zn	³¹ Ga	³² Ge	³³ As	³⁴ Se	³⁵ Br	³⁶ Kr	
Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 2	Cmp.: 9	Cmp.: 5	Cmp.: 15	Cmp.: 6	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 7	Cmp.: 3	Cmp.: 4	Cmp.: 5	Cmp.: 2	Cmp.: 8	Cmp.: 6	Cmp.: 6	Cmp.: 4	
Brd.: 1	Brd.: 2	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 4	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 2	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1							
³⁹ Y	⁴⁰ Zr	⁴¹ Nb	⁴² Mo	⁴³ Tc	⁴⁴ Ru	⁴⁵ Rh	⁴⁶ Pd	⁴⁷ Ag	⁴⁸ Cd	⁴⁹ In	⁵⁰ Sn	⁵¹ Sb	⁵² Te	⁵³ Xe	⁵⁴ At	
Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 2	Cmp.: 7	Cmp.: 3	Cmp.: 2	Cmp.: 3	Cmp.: 2	Cmp.: 4	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 2	Cmp.: 2	Cmp.: 6	Cmp.: 6	Cmp.: 4	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 1
Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1												
⁸⁸ Ra	⁸⁹ Ac	⁹⁰ Th	⁹¹ Pa	⁹² U	⁹³ Np	⁹⁴ Pu	⁹⁵ Am	⁹⁶ Cm	⁹⁷ Bk	⁹⁸ Cf	⁹⁹ Es	¹⁰⁰ Fm	¹⁰¹ Md	¹⁰² No	¹⁰³ Lr	¹⁰⁴ Rf
Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 4	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 1	Cmp.: 1										
Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1	Brd.: 1												

(Peng et al. 2023)



ACS Publications

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MUSE ‘EncyclopediA Autocatalytica’
Peng et al., JACS, 2023



Other N-cycle metalloenzymes

