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B.C. astrophysicists glimpse deep into the universe's past

Susan Lazaruk, CanWest News Service

Published: Wednesday, January 10, 2007

VANCOUVER -- Two B.C. astrophysicists have made a discovery they say is light years -- literally -- ahead of anything that's been seen before.

Using the powerful Hubble telescope, University of B.C. Prof. Harvey Richer and former student Jason Kalirai accidentally stumbled across a faint cluster of stars.

And the find is astronomical for the invaluable information it will give us about our own galaxy of stars, they said.

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"We were looking for something else and we found this," said Richer from the American Astronomical Society Meeting in Seattle yesterday where post-doctoral fellow Kalirai will deliver their findings today. "It was quite a bit of serendipity," he added.

The cluster is one billion light years away, 10 times farther than any previously observed cluster, said Richer, who taught Kalirai when he earned his undergraduate and post-graduate degrees at UBC.

A light year is measured by nine trillion (a million million or a thousand billion) kilometres. To put it into perspective, our galaxy is 100,000 light years across.

The find is exciting because it gives a rare glimpse into how the cluster of stars existed one billion years ago since it took that long for the image to reach the Hubble, circling 400 kilometres above the Earth, Richer said.

"And we can compare that cluster system and its fundamental characteristics with our cluster system and see how they're the same," he said. "That's the really exciting thing."

Kalirai said this is one of the deepest images taken by the current generation of high-powered telescopes. "No one else has seen this," said Kalirai, 28, who does research at the University of California Santa Cruz. "It's really exciting."

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