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Star survey reaches 70 sextillion

SYDNEY, Australia (CNN) --Ever wanted to wish upon a star? Well, you have 70,000 million million million to choose from.

That's the total number of stars in the known universe, according to a study by Australian astronomers.

It's also about 10 times as many stars as grains of sand on all the world's beaches and deserts.

The figure -- 7 followed by 22 zeros or, more accurately, 70 sextillion -- was calculated by a team of stargazers based at the Australian National University.

Speaking at the General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union meeting in Sydney, Dr Simon Driver said the number was drawn up based on a survey of one strip of sky, rather than trying to count every individual star.

The team used two of the world's most powerful telescopes, one at the Anglo-Australian Observatory in northern New South Wales state and one in the Canary Islands, to carry out their survey.

Within the strip of sky some 10,000 galaxies were pinpointed and detailed measurements of their brightness taken to calculate how many stars they contained.

A whole lot of zeros

That number was then multiplied by the number of similar sized strips needed to cover the entire sky, Driver said, and then multiplied again out to the edge of the visible universe.

He said there were likely many million more stars in the universe but the 70 sextillion figure was the number visible within range of modern telescopes.

The actual number of stars could be infinite he said.

The universe is so big light from the other side of the universe "hasn't reached us yet," The Age newspaper quoted him as saying.

Asked if he believed the huge scale of the universe meant there was intelligent life out there somewhere, he told the paper: "Seventy thousand million million million is a big number ... it's inevitable."

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