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NASA SCIENTIST, MARY VOYTEK, APPOINTED AS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE EARTH-LIFE SCIENCE INSTITUTE (ELSI), TOKYO INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (TOKYO TECH)

Dr. Mary A. Voytek, Director of the Astrobiology Program at NASA headquarters, has joined the Earth-Life Science Institute (ELSI) as its Executive Director.

ELSI was launched in December 2012 as the new research institute of the Tokyo Institute of Technology as part of the World Premier International Research Center Initiative (WPI) by the Japanese government. ELSI's mission is to establish an internationally recognized, world-class interdisciplinary research institute studying the Origins of Life in the context of the origin of the Earth and other planets, and to lead in implementing and promoting administrative innovation and organizational excellence.



Image: Dr. Mary A. Voytek.

Voytek, who has been a frequent visitor to ELSI almost since the institute was established and has been one of its Global Science Coordinators since 2015, will also take the position of Special Advisor to the President of Tokyo Institute of Technology, Kazuya Masu.

As described by ELSI Director Kei Hirose, Voytek is well respected in the science community and will help lead the institute as a manager, a scientist, a program innovator and someone who can help raise the international profile of the organization by implementing ELSI's goals and vision.

“Being able to recruit Mary Voytek for this important role is itself a sign that ELSI is developing its world presence and competitiveness,” Hirose said, describing her hire as a “strategic addition” for the second half of ELSI's ten-year WPI term.

Voytek said her great interest and excitement about coming to ELSI flows from the nature of the institute and “the opportunity it provides to work in a vibrant research community that is supportive of truly interdisciplinary research.”

“I am excited and feel lucky to be part of this unique effort supported by the commitment of the Japanese government to ELSI and the WPI program as a way to evolve science in Japan,” she said.

The World Premier International Research Center Initiative (WPI) was inaugurated in 2007 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Its stated mission is “to build within Japan ‘globally visible’ research centers that promote very high research standards and outstanding research environments, sufficiently attractive to prompt frontline researchers from around the world to want to work in them.”

Part of that effort explicitly calls for recruitment of scientists and administrators from around the world, and ELSI has been a leader in this outreach. The appointment of Voytek to help administer and direct the institute is in keeping with that mandate.

The WPI mission also includes a call to experiment with, and potentially adopt, new approaches to managing the institutes and their host institutions. Voytek brings to that task deep experience in running an important NASA program for ten years.

Tokyo Tech President Masu has described the hiring of Voytek as an important step in efforts to bring change to the university by providing and expanding an ELSI “model” for managing and innovating. Tokyo Tech has set the goal to become one of the world's top 10 research universities by 2030.

Voytek is now executive director at ELSI thanks to the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) program of the United States, agreed between NASA and Columbia University, an ELSI satellite campus where Voytek is an adjunct professor. The agreement between ELSI and Columbia is formally a temporary assignment contract that runs initially for two years and can be extended.

She came to NASA from the U.S. Geological Survey in Reston, VA., where she headed the USGS Microbiology and Molecular Ecology Laboratory. She has degrees in biochemistry, biology and ocean sciences.

Voytek said she intends to learn Japanese and is enamored with many Japanese ways.

“I love it here,” she said. “My background is Italian and so I tend to effuse. I hope to share my passion for science and collaboration with the staff here and hope to lead with cultural sensitivity and emotional intelligence.”

More information

Earth-Life Science Institute (ELSI)

Launched in 2012, ELSI is one of Japan's ambitious World Premier International research centers, whose aim is to achieve progress in broadly inter-disciplinary scientific areas by inspiring the world's greatest minds to come to Japan and collaborate on the most challenging scientific problems. ELSI's primary aim is to address the origin and co-evolution of the Earth and life.

Tokyo Institute of Technology (Tokyo Tech)

Tokyo Tech stands at the forefront of research and higher education as the leading university for science and technology in Japan. Tokyo Tech researchers excel in fields ranging from materials science to biology, computer science, and physics. Founded in 1881, Tokyo Tech hosts over 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students per year, who develop into scientific leaders and some of the most sought-after engineers in industry. Embodying the Japanese philosophy of "monotsukuri," meaning "technical ingenuity and innovation," the Tokyo Tech community strives to contribute to society through high-impact research.

World Premier International Research Center Initiative (WPI)

The WPI was launched in 2007 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to help build globally visible research centers in Japan. These institutes promote high research standards and outstanding research environments that attract frontline researchers from around the world. These centers are highly autonomous, allowing them to revolutionize conventional modes of research operation and administration in Japan.

Links

ELSI <http://www.elsi.jp/en/>

Tokyo Institute of Technology <https://www.titech.ac.jp/english/>

WPI <http://www.jsps.go.jp/english/>

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