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Thoughts on Columbia Disaster

By [Barrett Rock](#)

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February 5, 2003

This has been a very bad weekend for all of us connected to the "NASA family" often cited by people interviewed in connection with the Columbia disaster. For us here in New Hampshire, the shuttle disaster seems even more personal, since Christa McAuliffe was a high school teacher at Concord High, and the first signs of trouble on Saturday morning brought a sickening "Oh no! Not again." feeling as I thought back to Challenger and about this timeframe in 1986.

I take some comfort in knowing that some good may come of this tragedy, just as it did with the Challenger disaster. My Forest Watch program began in the wake of the Challenger explosion, as a result of a letter that I received shortly after I left NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and arrived at UNH in 1987. The letter, from a colleague of Christa's at Concord High (Phil Brown, a Concord High biology teacher), asked if I had some research connected to NASA which could be used in his classroom. He wanted to put a positive face on the NASA space program, then in shambles following the loss of Challenger.

Phil and I met in November of 1987 and January of 1988 to discuss what aspects of my research (remote sensing of forest damage across New England that could be linked to air pollution exposure) might be converted into effective classroom activities. Over the next two years, Phil and I worked together to develop such classroom activities, including the use of MultiSpec and Landsat TM data, field measurement activities, and the selection of white pine as a bio-indicator species of ground-level ozone exposure. Forest Watch was born, and continues today in more than 200 elementary, middle and high schools across New England. In 1994, Forest Watch became the basis for the science and education components of the

international science education program called GLOBE (Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment), currently involving more than 12,000 schools in more than 100 countries.

A very positive connection between NASA and hands-on K-12 science education has resulted from that unthinkable loss. I like to think that Christa and the other Challenger astronauts would be proud. I would also like to think that a similar unforeseen positive impact will be true of the loss of Columbia.

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