



Solar Wind Creates—and Whips—a Magnetic Tail Around Earth

By Ethan Siegel

As Earth spins on its axis, our planet's interior spins as well. Deep inside our world, Earth's metal-rich core produces a magnetic field that spans the entire globe, with the magnetic poles offset only slightly from our rotational axis. If you fly up to great distances, well above Earth's surface, you'll find that this magnetic web, called the magnetosphere, is no longer spherical. It not only bends away from the direction of the sun at high altitudes, but it exhibits some very strange features, all thanks to the effects of our parent star.

The sun isn't just the primary source of light and heat for our world; it also emits an intense stream of charged particles, the solar wind, and has its own intense magnetic field that extends much farther into space than our own planet's does. The solar wind travels fast, making the 150 million km (93 million mile) journey to our world in around three days, and is greatly affected by Earth. Under normal circumstances, our world's magnetic field acts like a shield for these particles, bending them out of the way of our planet and protecting plant and animal life from this harmful radiation.

But for every action, there's an equal and opposite reaction: as our magnetosphere bends the solar wind's ions, these particles also distort our magnetosphere, creating a long magnetotail that not only flattens and narrows, but whips back-and-forth in the onrushing solar wind. The particles are so diffuse that collisions between them practically never occur, but the electromagnetic interactions create waves in Earth's magnetosphere, which grow in magnitude and then transfer energy to other particles. The charged particles travel within the magnetic field toward both poles, and when they hit the ionosphere region of Earth's upper atmosphere, they collide with ions of oxygen and nitrogen causing aurora. Missions such as the European Space Agency and NASA Cluster mission have just led to the first accurate model and understanding of equatorial magnetosonic waves, one such example of the interactions that cause Earth's magnetotail to whip around in the wind like so.

The shape of Earth's magnetic field not only affects aurorae, but can also impact satellite electronics. Understanding its shape and how the magnetosphere interacts with the solar wind can also lead to more accurate predictions of energetic electrons in near-Earth space that can disrupt our technological infrastructure. As our knowledge increases, we may someday be able to reach one of the holy grails of connecting heliophysics to Earth: forecasting and accurately predicting space weather and its effects. Thanks to the Cluster Inner Magnetosphere Campaign, Van Allen Probes, Mars Odyssey Thermal Emission Imaging System, Magnetospheric Multiscale, and Heliophysics System Observatory missions, we're closer to this than ever before.

Kids can learn about how solar wind defines the edges of our solar system at NASA Space Place. <http://spaceplace.nasa.gov/interstellar>

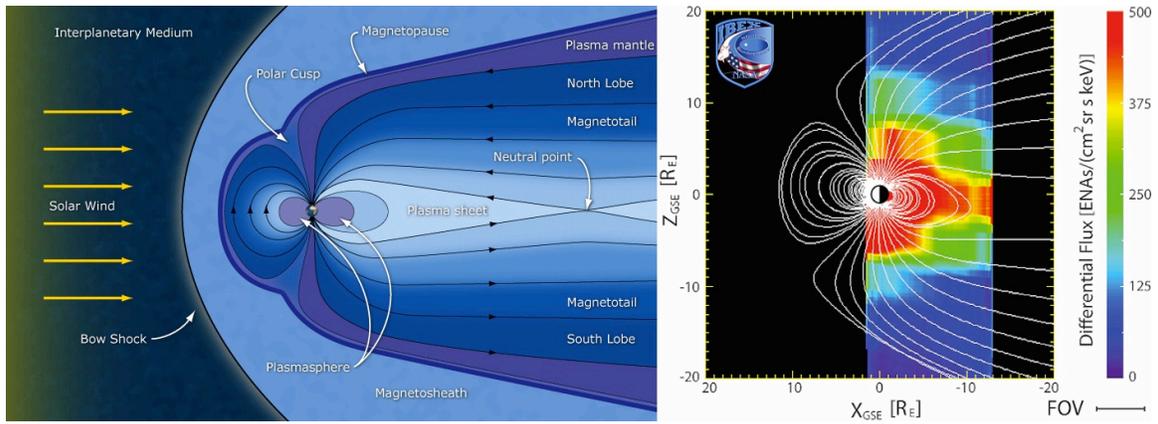


Image credit: ESA / C. T. Russell (L), of Earth's magnetic tail and its cause: the solar wind; Southwest Research Institute / IBEX Science Team (R), of the first image of the plasma sheet and plasmasphere created around Earth by the solar wind.