THE ORBITAL PROPERTIES OF EARTH IMPACTORS

Steven R. Chesley(1)*, Giovanni B. Valsecchi(2)(3), Mikael Granvik(4)(5), Davide Farnocchia(1), Shantanu Naidu(1), Robert Jedicke(6), Peter Brown(7)(8), and Siegfried Eggl(9)

(1) Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA 91109
(2) IAPS-INAF, 00133 Rome, Italy
(3) IFAC-CNR, 50019 Sesto Fiorentino, Italy
(4) Department of Computer Science, Electrical and Space Engineering, Luleå University of Technology, S-98128 Kiruna, Sweden
(5) Department of Physics, University of Helsinki, FI-00014 Helsinki, Finland
(6) Institute for Astronomy, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI 96822
(7) Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Western Ontario, London N6A 3K7, Canada
(8) Centre for Planetary Science and Exploration, University of Western Ontario, London N6A 5B7, Canada
(9) LSST/DIRAC Institute, Astronomy and Astrophysics Department, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105

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ABSTRACT

We present a set of synthetic Earth impactors that are tailored to match the orbital properties of the impacting population. Realistic impactor orbits are crucial inputs to a variety of investigations, such as those that seek to discern how well and how early a particular asteroid survey can detect impactors, or to understand the progression of impact probability as an impactor is tracked after discovery. We will describe our method, which relies on Opik's b-plane formalism, and place it in context with previous approaches. While the Opik framework assumes the restricted three body

* Corresponding author.
Email address: steve.chesley@jpl.nasa.gov
problem with a circular Earth orbit, our final synthetic impactors are differentially
corrected to ensure an impact in the N-body problem of the solar system. We test
the validity of the approach through brute force numerical tests, and we demonstrate
that our impactors are consistent with the observed velocity distribution of sporadic
fireballs.

The impactor population is distinct from the NEO population, not only by virtue of the
proximity of the asteroid orbit to that of the Earth, but also because low encounter
velocities are strongly favored. Thus the impacting population has an increased
prominence of low inclination and low eccentricity orbits, and Earth-like orbits in
particular, as compared to the NEO population as a whole. This in turn leads to a
different distribution on the sky, with stronger concentrations on the ecliptic near 90
degrees from opposition, especially when the distribution is weighted by the
annualized probability of Earth impact.

Our synthetic impactors are based on the NEO model of Granvik et al. (Icarus 2018).
The impactors are obtained by first culling the NEOs that do not pass close enough
to Earth’s orbit to afford an impact and then subsampling these potential impactors
according to their annualized impact probability. With this approach we sample
around 60,000 NEOs to capture one impactor. Following the Granvik et al. model,
this approach also allows us to track which main-belt source region produced each
impactor. This information allows us to quantify the relative contributions of the
source regions for Earth impactors, which has implications for the physical
characteristics of the impacting population.

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