

A space exploration for Enceladus' plumes: importance of sample return and in-situ mass spectrometry

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Here we propose a sample-return mission of water-rich plumes erupting from warm fractures near the south pole of Enceladus. During collection of plume samples, the spacecraft will conduct in-situ gas analyses with a high-resolution multi-turn time of flight mass spectrometer. The mass spectrometry would provide the abundances and isotopic compositions of major gas species included in the plumes. These observational data would allow us to discuss the temperature and isotopic heterogeneity of primordial volatiles in the Saturn-forming region of the protoplanetary disk, geochemical processes occurred in Enceladus' ocean, and possible metabolic reactions and energy for chemithoautotrophy. Once the plume samples are returned safely in 2030's, microscopic analyses for returned samples will be conducted, including synchrotron X-ray analyses, chemical and mineralogical analyses with a nano-SIMS, and calorimetry with radioactive isotopic tracers. In order to achieve both sufficiently high encountering velocity for TOF spectroscopy and low velocity for intact capture of the plume particles, the spacecraft needs to either orbit Saturn and fly-by Enceladus or orbit the satellite itself and still is able to return to the earth after the rendezvous phase.

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