



## SAFE LANDING

# Touchdown for rover in search of life on Mars

■ Michelle Wheeler

NASA scientists jumped out of their seats and hugged each other as the words "touchdown confirmed" echoed across mission control in California yesterday, signalling the successful landing of the Curiosity rover on Mars.

Scientists clapped cautiously at each stage of the final descent, which was dubbed the "seven minutes of terror" because of the risky and untested nature of the landing.

The spacecraft had to drop its speed from 6km a second with the help of a parachute, a "rocket backpack" for a powered descent and a "sky crane" that lowered the rover to the surface.

Curiosity sent through pictures within seconds of landing. One of the first was a grainy image of the horizon and a wheel of the rover, just visible through clouds of dust kicked up by the landing.

Both NASA administrator Char-



**First look: An image from the rover.**

les Bolden and White House science and technology advisor John Holdren were quick to link the feat to human exploration of Mars.

"Today, right now, the wheels of Curiosity have begun to blaze the trail for human footprints on Mars," Mr Bolden said.

After a 567 million kilometre, 36-week journey from Earth, the rover





will explore Gale Crater, an area scientists believe was once filled with water and could hold evidence of life.

Dr Holdren said he could only imagine what incredible data and new understandings would be uncovered.

“Curiosity is going to provide critical information about the Red

Planet and what our astronauts will find once they arrive,” he said.

Murdoch University robotics lecturer and Mars Society WA director Graham Mann said Curiosity would gather more information than ever before about the planet’s habitability.

He said the society believed human exploration could be achieved

a decade earlier than US President Barack Obama’s goal of the 2030s.

“Many, many people have argued that the problems of getting to Mars are no longer technological but really just a matter of political will,” Dr Mann said.

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**Success: NASA scientists celebrate as they learn Curiosity has landed safely on Mars.** Pictures: Reuters