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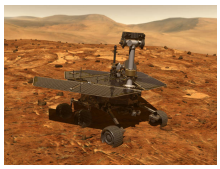

The next generation of Martian rovers already dwarf exploration icons Spirit and Opporuntiy
Courtesy NASA / JPL-Caltech

Conference to Decide Future of Mars Exploration

It takes place this week at the University of Plymouth

The future of missions to the Red Planet will most likely be decided in Great Britain this week, at the meeting between the American space agency NASA and the European Space Agency (ESA). Held at the University of Plymouth, the conference, which will take place from on Monday to Wednesday, will be attended by some 20 delegates, the BBC News reports, and will further underline the fact that the way to exploring Mars is through cooperation, and not competition.

As technology progresses more and more, sending increasingly larger rovers on other planets has become a trend and a necessity, seeing how many types of data can now be gathered by a single instrument. However, this means that the sizes of the exploring robots have to increase as well. The days of machines such as Spirit and Opportunity are over, as they have only limited capabilities, and cannot be used for assessing subtle variations in the climate, for deep-drilling, or for burning soil inside themselves, in order to analyze what comes out.

On the other hand, the Curiosity and ExoMars rovers, the first one developed and owned by NASA, and the other one created by ESA, are both roughly the size of a small car, and carry numerous instruments with them, to give them the best views and analysis tools possible. But the costs of sending them to Mars are immense, as the Mars Science Laboratory (MSL) Curiosity rover is already over-budget, and ExoMars had to drop a scientific payload in order to remain within its own.

At the conference, hopes are high that officials from the two agencies will decide to work together on future missions, so as to share the costs, and ensure that the best-equipped vehicle is sent on Mars or elsewhere. Already, NASA and ESA agreed to launch ExoMars aboard an American rocket, together with a Mars orbiter owned by the Americans.

"Plymouth's bold, dynamic approach and spirit of innovation is marking us out as the enterprise university. This visit will serve to further strengthen our links with ESA and NASA in the city, bringing young people into science and growing our world-class research and international links," Professor Wendy Purcell, the vice-chancellor at the University of Plymouth, says of the conference.