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Mars Rocks Are Red, White And Blue

From: Stig_Agermose@online.pol.dk (Stig Agermose)
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Science and Health

July 29, 1997

Mars Rocks are Red, White, Blue

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOSTON (AP) -- America's Pathfinder spacecraft is finding red, white and blue rocks and three different types of soil at its landing site on Mars, researchers report.

In a report Monday to a meeting of the American Astronomical Society, Peter Smith of the University of Arizona said Pathfinder pictures taken with different filters show a faint bluish tint on one side of exposed rocks, while the other side of the rocks is a typical Martian red.

Some partially buried rocks, he said, are a whitish color and may actually be layers of a hard material called caliche, a calcium carbonate rock material common in Arizona.

Pathfinder landed on Mars July 4 and has taken hundreds of photographs. The craft's rover is creeping across the planet surface, examining rocks and soil along the way.

In panorama photos taken by Pathfinder of its landing site, there is a striking two-color appearance on dozens of rocks, Smith said.

"You divide the scene into two parts -- the red part and the blue part," he said. "There is a very clear difference between the red side and the blue side."

Smith said that the blue side is on the east side of the rocks, suggesting that the sometime-ferocious wind storms on Mars may have scoured off a layer, uncovering the color. The west side of the rocks, protected from the wind, are red, probably from layers of Martian soil, he said.

"The strong wind comes through and it could have sandblasted the one side of these rocks," he said. It could have happened from one huge storm, or "it could have happened gradually over millions of years."

Tracks made by the wheels of the Pathfinder's small rover, Sojourner, have revealed that in some places around the Pathfinder is a thin layer of reddish soil on top of white rock that could be caliche, Smith said.

"If you had a broom you might be able to sweep the dust off and find a whole layer of rock there," Smith said.

Sojourner operators have intentionally spun the wheels of the small vehicle to churn up the soil. Scientists then analyzed how the dirt slumps to determine its texture. Smith said they have found three types of soils within the small area that Sojourner has explored.

"There is a type that is like fine grained beach sand," said Smith. Another soil is blocky and dense, "something like adobe." The third soil type is powdery and loose, "something like kitchen flour."

Drifts and depressions bear evidence of a massive flood that once coursed through the Pathfinder site, and there is other evidence water was once present, Smith said.

"There appears to be the remains of a puddle. The water probably evaporated a billion years ago and the pattern is still there," he said.

Pathfinder instruments have detected virtually no water at the landing site now.

"It is bone dry," he said. "There isn't any place on Earth that is this dry."

Pictures do show clouds, probably from water, in the skies over the site. Each Martian dawn sky photographed by Pathfinder has included thin copper-colored wisps that Smith said are clouds of water vapor. The clouds, however, burn off as the Martian day advances.

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