

Ireland on Mars: Opportunity Heading for “Oileán Ruaidh”

On the 2,363rd Martian day, or sol, of the rover’s mission on Mars, the rover science team determined the site on Mars to be twinned, or linked with an island in Ireland. After a months-long trek through a bleak and featureless landscape, NASA’s Mars Exploration Rover Opportunity relayed the view of a distant speck in the land, revealing a dark, rounded rock in the distance. Judged to be an iron meteorite, the rock was named “Oileán Ruaidh” (pronounced ay-lan ruah), which is an island in Mulroy Bay in the Northwest of Ireland known more commonly as Island Roy. While “Island Roy” is a phonetic approximation of the Gaelic name, “Oileán Ruaidh” means *the red island*.

NASA facilitated the link between an island in Ireland and a location on Mars in coordination with the League of Imaginary Scientists, whose art and science project compares the climate history of Mars with projections of Earth’s future. The League of Imaginary Scientists visited and conducted studies on Oileán Ruaidh as part of the “Lovely Weather” residency program, organized jointly by County Donegal’s Regional Cultural Centre in Letterkenny and Leonardo/OLATS as a format for artists and scientists to explore global climate concerns in a local context.

The local community of County Donegal participated in the island’s selection with nominations of sites for the twinning. Oileán Ruaidh was selected after nomination by Councilor Noel McBride. Two of the island’s fourteen inhabitants, Mary and Paddy Doherty, quickly found their roles as the island’s cultural ambassadors extended to ambassadors to Mars, as the League of Imaginary Scientists descended upon their island.



Oileán Ruaidh is a small island in Mulroy Bay in Ireland’s northwest County Donegal. The island is only sixty-five hectare and easily navigable by foot. “The red island” shrinks and grows with the tides and occasionally becomes unreachable when the causeway connecting the island to the mainland is underwater.

Image Credit: The League of Imaginary Scientists



The rock named for Oileán Ruaidh, about 45 centimeters (18 inches) wide from this angle, was about 31 meters (102 feet) away from Opportunity when the rover took this picture immediately after an 81-meter (266-foot) drive during the 2,363rd Martian day, or sol, of the rover’s mission on Mars.

Image Credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Cornell University

www.imaginaryscience.org/lovelyweather
<http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov/gallery/press/opportunity/20100921a.html>
<http://www.regionalculturalcentre.com/index.php/category/lovelyweather/>
<http://www.olats.org/fcm/artclimat/donegal2010/donegal2010.php>