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Research using a European Planetary Simulation Facility

J. P. Merrison, J.J. Iversen, K.R. Rasmussen
[1]Institute of Physics and Astronomy, University of Aarhus, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
(merrison@phys.au.dk/ Fax: +45-86120740)

Abstract

This unique and recently improved planetary simulation facility is capable of re-creating extreme terrestrial, Martian and other planetary environments. It is supported by EU activities including **Europlanet 2020 RI** here the latest research and networking activities will be presented. This facility is also used as a test facility by ESA for the forthcoming ExoMars 2020 mission. Specifically it is capable of recreating the key physical parameters such as temperature, pressure (gas composition), wind flow and importantly the suspension/transport of dust or sand particulates. This facility is available both to the scientific and Industrial communities.

1. Europlanet Transnational Access

This environmental simulator facility is utilized for a broad range of research programs including; the study of other planets (such as Mars), for recreating extreme terrestrial environments, or in specific investigations involving aerosols and other forms of particulate transport. The facility is also involved in the Europlanet 2020 Research Infrastructure through which a trans-national access program is allowing numerous research groups access to this facility. Some selected recent projects are listed below;

- Polar CO_2 ice on Mars (G. Portyankina et al., Bern CH) [6]
- LIBS system on Mars2020 (N. Murdoch et al., ISAE France) [4]
- Volcanic ash transport (J. Taddeucci et al. INGV, Italy)
- Ice Jets on Enceladus (A. Davila, NASA USA)
- High speed Jets (J. Sesterhenn, TUB Germany)
- In-situ utilization on Mars2020 and dust loading (J. McClean Imperial UK)
- Passive acoustic wind sensor on Mars (R. Lorenz, John Hopkins University USA)

Other activities include the development, testing and calibration of sensor and planetary lander systems, both for ESA and NASA. Currently testing for missions ExoMars 2020 and Mars 2020 are being carried out.

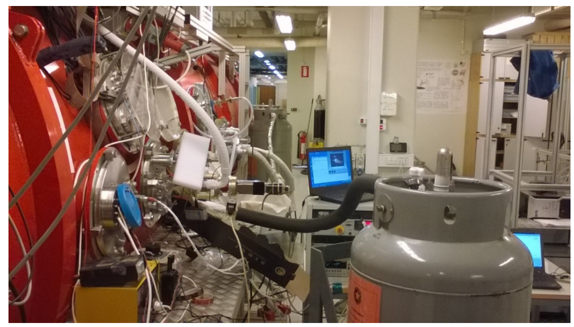

Figure 1 The main Planetary Simulation Facility during early use of the new liquid nitrogen atmospheric cooling system (for ExoMars 2020 testing).

2. Improved design and operation

The simulator consists of a 35m^3 environmental (thermal-vacuum) chamber within which a re-circulating wind tunnel is housed [1,2,6]. The wind is generated by a set of two fans which draw flow down the 2m×1m tunnel section and return it above and below. The test section can be fully removed for access. Wind speeds in the range 1-40 m/s have been demonstrated.
Cooling is achieved by a novel liquid nitrogen flow system which has achieved temperatures below -160ºC. The inner chamber is thermally isolated from the vacuum chamber.
Improved functionalities of this facility (funded by Europlanet 2020RI) include the implementation of;

- An atmospheric (gas) cooling system (fig 1) allowing independent control of the air temperature (tested to -50°C),
- A particle image velocimetry (PIV) system has been installed consisting of high speed imaging and laser illumination (fig 3).
- An LED based ultraviolet (UV) light source has been implemented capable of simulating the solar UV spectrum.

3. Atmospherics and Aerosols

A unique capability of this wind tunnel facility is the production and controlled study of suspended particulates (dust, ash, sand, etc.). The combination of low pressure, low temperature, composition and aerosol injection is ideal for recreating the environment of the upper atmosphere of terrestrial planets, gas giants or even moons). This type of experiment is a continuation of a large body of research performed over the past decade studying dust aerosols, specifically granular electrification, erosion and deposition processes [1-3]. This research has direct relevance to aerosol studies on Earth which impact air quality, the environment and climate. An advanced type of Laser aerosol and (2D) wind flow sensor is used for detailed study and control of these environmental parameters (fig 2).

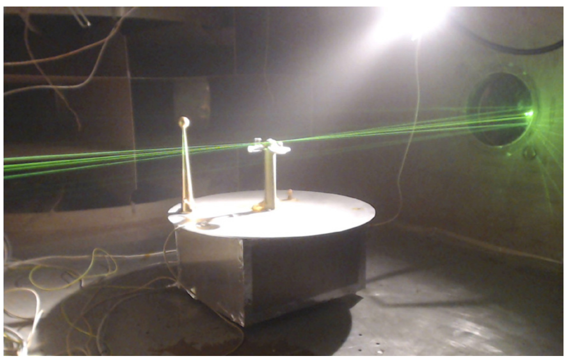

Figure 2 Europlanet funded testing of the DREAMS sensor systems on the ExoMars 2016 (Schiaparelli) lander showing the Laser based wind/dust sensor used for aerosol studies [5].

4. Planetary Surface Simulation

With control of wind flow at low pressure and temperature this facility is well suited for recreating the environment at the surfaces of terrestrial type planets such as Mars, Earth and Titan. The interaction of wind and the planetary surface, specifically the transport of sand and dust is fundamental to understanding the evolution of the planets' surface and atmosphere. Laboratory studies of the entrainment, flow, deposition and erosion are scarce and empirical in nature. The effects of low atmospheric pressure, composition, temperature and even gravity can now be studied in detail. For example detailed measurements of sand grain trajectories are now being made under Martian pressure and composition in wind tunnel studies. This has direct relevance to the recent and still poorly understood observations of active sand transport at the Martian surface.

Figure 3 Inside the simulator during pre-testing of SuperCam for NASAs Mars2020 mission, related projects also funded by Europlanet [4].

5. Conclusion

This planetary simulation facility has many unique and recently improved features which make it well suited for both planetary research applications and the development/testing of instrumentation. Details of some of the most recent collaborative research activities will be summarized. For information on access to this facility please contact the author.

Acknowledgements

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