

ADLER STATEMENT ABOUT PLUTO RECLASSIFICATION

The Adler Planetarium noted with interest the 24 August 2006 actions of the 26th General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union (IAU). The IAU decisions place Pluto in a new class of 'dwarf planets', no longer one of the traditional planets of our Solar System that have been recognized by scientists and the public for more than 75 years.

Pluto was discovered by Illinoisan Clyde Tombaugh, just months before the opening of the Adler Planetarium. Visitors to the Adler have long enjoyed the Alphonso lanelli sculpture in our lobby - a bronze relief depicting eight planets – that was commissioned before Tombaugh made his famous discovery on February 18, 1930. Because of the IAU decisions, our prized lanelli sculpture is for the first time in its history an accurate depiction of the planets in our solar system!

The IAU's historic vote is the latest event in a long debate among scientists intent on classifying the objects in our Solar System. Classification is often a useful tool in developing a deeper understanding of our natural world. While the particular name assigned to a certain class of objects may take on importance beyond its place in the classification scheme, the process of understanding the nature of that object, how it formed and is evolving relative to its environment is the goal of science research. The Adler invites and has invited visitors and school children to participate in this fascinating, on-going investigation.

The concept of a planet has changed throughout history. Before astronomers accepted that the Earth orbits the Sun, their list of planets (meaning wanderers) included Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and also the Sun and the Moon. This earlier list of seven planets leaves its legacy in the names of the days of the week in many languages, even though the Sun and Moon have not been considered as planets for hundreds of years! When Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto were discovered, the list of planets and our knowledge of the universe expanded. Even though we've shortened the list (for now), our understanding of our cosmos continues to increase as we continue to explore it.

Regardless of its new status as a "dwarf planet," Pluto will continue to attract the attention of scientists and the public. New telescopes and exploration technologies will provide an ever-increasing amount of information about this far-off world and others like it. The first of NASA's "New Frontiers" missions – New Horizons – was launched earlier this year and is going to Pluto. We are certain it will reignite popular interest and debate when it reaches its destination in 2015 and then moves deeper into the Kuiper Belt to observe other dwarf planets.

As every parent knows, Pluto is a popular object among children. It is a small, distant and very mysterious world. While today's announcement demoting Pluto from its status as a planet may disappoint some young, future astronomers, it will surely challenge the next generation of explorers to consider new ideas about planetary science and the formation of our Solar System. The Adler Planetarium welcomes the opportunity this heightened attention to Pluto has created for inspiring and engaging young and old alike in the interesting progress of science!

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President
August 24, 2006