

Pluto Demoted

By Dr Tom Mason, Director

The International Astronomical Union has voted to downgrade Pluto from its status as the ninth planet in the Solar system to a dwarf planet aka a Trans Neptunian Object (TNO), or ice dwarf.

The most interesting thing about the Pluto story is the reaction of “the man in the street”, asking “Who are these people of the IAU to tell us that Pluto has been downgraded?” I suppose the short answer is because that is their job. The IAU is the arbiter of planetary names, asteroid names and all of the nomenclatorial minutiae that are essential if scientific order is to be maintained. “They” represent the body of professional astronomers in the world, and are the experts in the field. They do the same job as the taxonomists who keep tabs on the names of all of the plants and animals on the planet.

“Pluto has been an oddball from the word go”

Having said all that I must admit that I was disappointed at their decision. I am quite schizophrenic in fact as my scientific mind knows that their decision is probably right, and that we should recognise divisions of greater and lesser objects in the skies. As our knowledge increases, it is entirely reasonable to assume that we will have to make refinements and changes. And let's face it, Pluto has been an oddball from the word go when Clyde Tombaugh first found it. Its orbit is egg-shaped; it is at a completely different angle from the other planets; sometimes it is closer to the Sun than Neptune and sometimes not. It has the distinct flavour of captive about it, rather than original coalescing from the new born Sun's dusty accretion disk. But my romantic side is saddened that the work of Tombaugh, who set out to look for the predicted planets beyond Neptune, may be forgotten or relegated to a sort



Image Credit: NASA

Pluto and Earth Compared With a volume less than 1% of Earth's, the former planet is considerably smaller than our homeworld.

of famous failure. It's the same feeling I have when I show classes of schoolchildren Yuri Gagarin's photograph, and then discover that the name of the first man in space is not known by the majority of them. I suspect most adults would not recognise him either which seems shocking when you consider how many can recognise the Big Brother contestants and their fleeting fifteen minutes worth of fame.

So we will return to the classrooms and lecture spaces and opine upon this change. The truth is that for an educator it is a gift! It allows us to tell a fascinating story and to spice it up with all of the new discoveries out there where planets are cold icy dwarves and that they have moons that we have only discovered last year. Also some of them are twins, endlessly circling each other, with their common centre of gravity in the empty space between them. Who said astronomy was boring, you could not invent this stuff!