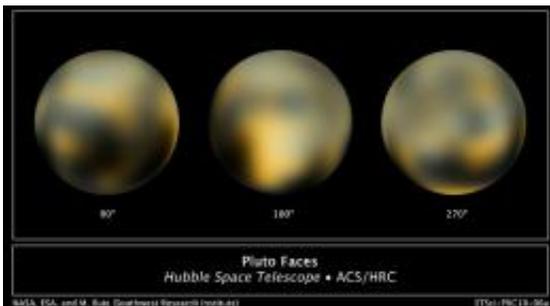


Contests to name moons and exoplanets irk International Astronomical Union

April 25 2013, by Bob Yirka



A best-fit color image/map of Pluto generated with the Hubble Space Telescope and advanced computers. Image: NASA

(Phys.org) —Two recent contests—one run by the SETI researchers that made the two most recent Pluto moon discoveries and another by an independent group called Uwingu to name an exoplanet—have caused the International Astronomical Union (IAU) to issue a statement labeling such contests misleading since the winning names chosen by the organizing bodies have no official recognition.

Here on Earth there is just one body that is officially recognized as the gate-keeper for naming stars, planets, moons and anything else that exists out in space—the IAU. But that hasn't stopped other people or organizations from making up names on their own, or from having contests to name whatever they like.

Recently, Mark Showalter, a research scientist with the [SETI project](#) and co-discoverer of two new moons circling the ex-planet Pluto ran a [contest](#) to give them names. The IAU has dubbed them P1 and P2, which are actually just placeholders. Those that discover planets and moons and such, get first crack at submitting a name for them to the IAU. Instead of thinking up something himself, Showalter and colleagues chose to hold a contest at SETI—members submitted many ideas but two won out—Vulcan and Cerberus (the former got the most votes after being supported by William Shatner). Showalter made good on his promise and submitted the two names to the IAU, but they may not be approved—Vulcan has already been used as the name for the hypothetical planet between Mercury and the Sun, and Cerberus has already been used to name an asteroid.

What really got the IAU's attention however was a contest held by a group that calls itself Uwingu. Their stated mission is to financially reward promising scientific endeavors. They recently ran a contest with the aim of giving a better name to Alpha Centauri Bb—an exoplanet discovered just last year and the closest ever found to our own planet. Uwingu collected \$4.99 for each nomination and 99 cents for each vote. The winner was "Albertus Alauda" submitted by a guy that wanted to honor his grandfather. Upon hearing of the contest, the IAU felt moved to respond—they did so by issuing a press release chastising Uwingu (without mentioning them by name) for holding an [exoplanet](#) naming contest that would not result in the winner receiving official recognition, or even be recognized as a process leading to recognition.

Uwingu, apparently unswayed by the IAU's rebuke has chosen to extend the contest, anticipating far more entrants and votes as a result of the press it has received due to the IAU's response.

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