



Pluto's Status Dwarfed

By Kerri Savage

Science textbooks and lesson plans need to be revised after this past summer. Pluto, measuring only a quarter of the size of the Earth's moon, and composed of primarily rock and ice, has been demoted to a dwarf planet.

In August, 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) met in Prague and redefined the term "planet". Under the definition, Pluto was demoted from planet status and along with similarly sized objects like Ceres and Eris, assigned the term dwarf planet, for lack of a better word for this categorization.

Discovered in 1930 by Clyde Tombaugh in Arizona's Lowell Observatory, Pluto was quickly given the honour of being our solar system's ninth planet at that time. Advances in telescope technology have now allowed scientists to take a closer look at the far reaches of our solar system. Subsequent study of other celestial bodies having similar mass and characteristics as Pluto have made scientists debate Pluto's planet status.

Pluto's planet status has long been argued by scientists as Pluto is not only smaller and less massive than the other planets in our solar system, but smaller than many of the moons or other natural satellites in our solar system.

Plutonian facts:

- It takes Pluto 247.92 years to orbit the Sun compared to the Earth which only takes one year.
- Pluto has three moons - Charon, Hydra and Nyx. Charon was discovered in 1978 and Hydra and Nyx discovered only in 2005 by the Hubble space telescope.
- Pluto was named for the Roman God of the underworld. The name was suggested by an 11-year-old girl from England, who was given 5 pounds as a reward. The Disney character Pluto, introduced in 1930, was named in honour of the astronomical object.

The first spacecraft to visit Pluto will be New Horizons, slated to be launched by NASA in January, 2007. However, it won't be until 2015 that the spacecraft will come closest to Pluto. New Horizons will study the geology and morphology of Pluto and its moon Charon, and map and photograph their surfaces. Some of Tombaugh's ashes, Pluto's discoverer, will be aboard the spacecraft.