

Pedagogical Considerations

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What was the public response to the 2006 IAU definition of a planet? Scientists ignore this question at their peril. The large majority of us are supported by public funds—their opinion matters.

Since the discovery of Pluto's large satellite Charon in 1977 enabled the mass of the system to be definitively determined, no serious scientist has published a paper linking Pluto with any other planet. The discovery of trans-neptunian objects in the early 90's confirmed the existence of a population much more like Pluto than like the other unquestioned planets. Yet throughout that period—and before, for a generation or more following the discovery of Pluto—every schoolchild has been taught that there are nine planets in the solar system. For better or worse, the entire human race has been taught that Pluto is a planet.

Does it make sense to try to change everyone's understanding of the composition of the solar system, to agree with our current scientific understanding of the situation? Or does it make more sense to keep things as they have been throughout living memory, and perhaps use this interesting historical artifact as a jumping-off point for a more meaningful discussion of the local universe?