



Local institute puts its stamp on moons of Pluto

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Parents-to-be go through a lot of anguish in picking baby names, but thankfully they'll never need to go through this: convening nine people to pore over scholarly texts on arcane and obscure Greek gods, then sending their selections to an international committee of the pickiest grandparents on the planet.

And when it's all over, emerging breathlessly to tell the waiting world that the new babies' names will be ... umm ... Nix and Hydra?

Scientists from San Antonio-based Southwest Research Institute got to play that name game in choosing the identities for the two moons just discovered revolving around Pluto outside the orbit of the planet's closest moon, Charon.

It concluded Friday when the International Astronomical Union officially blessed the choices suggested by the nine-member scientific team that first observed the two moons in May 2005.

The brighter, outermost satellite will be called Hydra, after the terrifying nine-headed serpent with poisonous blood that guarded the entrance to hell. The other satellite will be named for Charon's mother Nix, the goddess of darkness.

The names just seemed to fit into the lore of Pluto, which was named after the Roman god of the underworld, said Alan Stern, director of space studies at the institute's Boulder, Colo., office and part of the discovery team.

"The whole Pluto myth is about death and darkness, so the goddess of darkness seemed particularly appropriate," Stern said of Nix, which usually is Nyx. And Hydra was a fitting name for the furthest moon of the ninth planet.

"Because it had nine heads and because it was the guard to the gate, it seemed appropriately scary and appropriate to make it (the name of) the outermost moon," Stern said.

Scientists discovered the moons with the Hubble Space Telescope as they prepared for the New Horizons mission, an unmanned probe to the planet that launched in January.

The IAU has final word on naming planets and other astronomical bodies, but asks members of the discovery team to make recommendations. Tradition calls for naming planets after Roman gods but moons after the characters of Greek mythology.

Stern said discovery team members, who came from Southwest Research; Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff,

Ariz.; Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory; and the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, pored through texts and the Internet in their search.

They came up with about 40 candidates, then narrowed the list to six pairs of names, then finally settled on Nix and Hydra, which they forwarded to the Planetary System Nomenclature Working Group of the IAU.

"They take this very, very seriously," Stern said. "This is something that will last in perpetuity. They don't want it to be somehow cheapened by naming them after people's children or their favorite beer."

Max Mutchler from the space telescope institute said he consulted a university classics professor in the search for potential names and still has a book on archaic Roman religions sitting on his desk.

"It was fun," he said. "Most of the time, we deal with stuff that is very technical. This was like frosting on the cake."

Still, he admitted, naming his own children was easier.

"The committee was a lot smaller — it was mainly just me and my wife," he said. "And there was no international body that had to approve it."

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