

A Planet Named Easterbunny?

You know Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. But how about their smaller cousins Eris, Ceres, Orcus, and Makemake? How about Easterbunny?

These are all names given to relatively large “planet-like” objects recently found in the outer reaches of our solar system. Some were just temporary nicknames, others are now official and permanent. Each has a unique story.

“The names we chose are important,” says Caltech astronomer Mike Brown, who had a hand in many of the discoveries. “These objects are a part of our solar system; they're in our neighborhood. We ‘gravitate’ to them more if they have real names, instead of technical names like 2003 UB313.”

Nearby planets such as Venus and Mars have been known since antiquity and were named by the ancient Romans after their gods. In modern times, though, who gets to name newly discovered dwarf planets and other important solar-system bodies?

In short, whoever finds it names it. For example, a few days after Easter 2005, Brown and his colleagues discovered a bright dwarf planet orbiting in the Kuiper belt. The team's informal nickname for this new object quickly became Easterbunny.

However, ever since its formation in 1919, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) ultimately decides whether to accept or reject the name suggested by an object's discoverers. "Easterbunny" probably wouldn't be approved.

According to IAU guidelines, comets are named after whoever discovered them—such as comet Hale-Bopp, named after its discoverers Alan Hale and Thomas Bopp. Asteroids can be named almost anything. IAU rules state that objects in the Kuiper belt should be given mythological names related to creation.

So Brown's team started brainstorming. They considered several Easter-esque names: Eostre, the pagan mythological figure that may be Easter's namesake; Manabozho, the Algonquin rabbit trickster god.

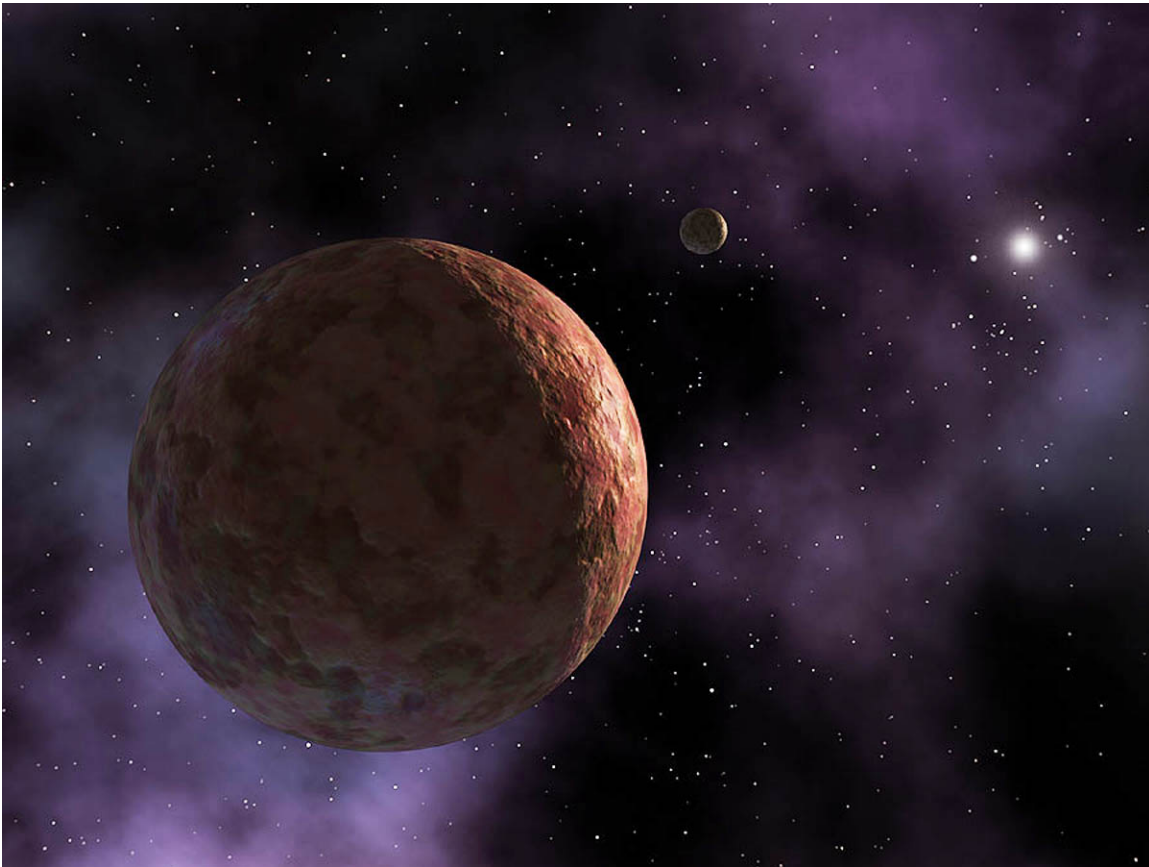
In the end, they settled on Makemake (pronounced MAH-kay MAH-kay), the creator of humanity in the mythology of Easter Island, so named because Europeans first arrived there on Easter 1722.

Other names have other rationales. The dwarf planet discovered in 2005 that triggered a fierce debate over Pluto's status was named Eris, for the Greek goddess of strife and discord. Another dwarf planet with an orbit that mirrors Pluto's was dubbed Orcus, a god in Etruscan mythology that, like Pluto, ruled the underworld.

Brown says he takes “this naming business” very seriously and probably spends too much time on it. “But I enjoy it.” More tales of discovery and naming may be found in Brown's blog MikeBrownsPlanets.com.

Constellations have also been named after ancient gods, human figures, and animals. Kids can start to learn their constellations by making a Star Finder for this month at spaceplace.nasa.gov/en/kids/st6starfinder/st6starfinder.shtml. There you will also find a handy explanation of why astrology has no place in science.

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Artist's rendering of dwarf planet MakeMake, discovered around Easter 2005. Unlikely to gain acceptance their nickname Easterbunny, the discoverers named it for the god of humanity in the mythology of Easter Island.