

Union Astronomique Internationale
Prof. Dr. Ewine F. van Dishoeck
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Berne, 4 November 2020

Request of the Swiss Academy of Sciences to rename the Agassiz Promontory

Dear Prof. van Dishoeck, Dear President,

Prof. Schildkecht forwarded us your letter of 30 September informing him that you and the other IAU Officers unanimously support the decision of the WGPSN to not rename the Agassiz Promontory on the moon. We are quite surprised by this decision in the current context of the Black Lives Matter movement and with respect to the Inclusive Astronomy theme of the IAU centennial celebrations of 2019. We therefore would like to underline that the Swiss Academy of Sciences supports the renaming of the Agassiz Promontory for the following reasons.


Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) was, from all we know historically, not only a brilliant Swiss-American scientist, but also a harsh and outspoken racist, even for 19th century standards. He contested Darwin's theory of evolution and advocated instead a theory about a hierarchy of human races. He thus tried to justify the inferiority of black people based on pseudo-scientific arguments with the aim to legitimate racism and slavery. This aspect of its "scientific" activity provided ground for not abolishing slavery and for racial segregation, thus affecting the lives of countless people.

Since the naming of places on Earth and in space is always an honour, we, as the Swiss Academy of Sciences, think that there should exist a renaming process when a person does not deserve anymore to be remembered in honour. Their scientific merit shall not be the only criteria and we think that their ethical ideas and behaviour has to be in an acceptable range. For Louis Agassiz this seems now clearly not to be the case.

Historians and social movements like Black Lives Matter are demanding from society to remove or contextualize monuments linked to racism and slavery. In the last years, many places and monuments named after Louis Agassiz were renamed, following these arguments. The Swiss town Neuchatel renamed a square last year. In 2020 the Stanford University in California agreed to relocate a statue of Agassiz from the front of the Jordan Hall to a place where it can be put in context. We also just learned that the IAU Task Group for Lunar Nomenclature considers to rename two objects named after Johannes Stark (1874-1957) and Philipp Lenard (1862-1947), because of their racist and antisemitic views and activities, despite their scientific eminence attested by the Nobel Prize.

In our view the case of Stark and Lenard is very much alike the case of Louis Agassiz. They are all outstanding scientists, but with nowadays unacceptable racist views and activities, which were already recognised by some contemporaries.

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A strong science culture including ethical behaviour helping society to improve is at the heart of our activities at the Swiss Academy of Sciences. We are convinced that continuing to honour Louis Agassiz with statues or place names on Earth or in space is not anymore defensible nowadays in the light of current societal developments. In our view the renaming of the Agassiz Promontory is well justified and we therefore support a thorough reconsideration of your decision as it is being done for the sites named after Stark and Lenard. The renaming of the Agassiz Promontory would be an important signal to society that ethics cannot be dissociated from science.

Sincerely yours,



President



Secretary General

Copies:

- Rita Schulz
- Charles Wood
- Hans Fässler, Hans Barth, Sasha Huber