

**International Astronomical Union**  
**Union Astronomique Internationale**

98bis bd Arago, F - 75014 Paris, France ▪ [www.iau.org](http://www.iau.org)

Prof. dr. Ewine F. van Dishoeck – President

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June 14, 2021

Swiss Academy of Sciences  
Prof. dr. J. Pfister  
Laupenstrasse 7  
3001 Bern  
Switzerland

Dear Professor Pfister, dear President,

This letter is in response to your letter of November 4, 2020 to the International Astronomical Union (IAU) with the renewed request to rename the Agassiz Promontory on the Moon. In it, we also provide more background information on the various issues raised in your letter.

First, we would like to stress that a strong culture of ethical behavior and inclusiveness is at the heart of all of the activities of the IAU. Our [Strategic Plan 2020-2030](#) states this explicitly as one of its main goals, and our [IAU Code of Conduct](#) starts with an Ethics Policy. Both documents are posted prominently on our website, [www.iau.org](http://www.iau.org).

Moreover, the IAU has issued a [Statement on Racism](#) and Discrimination in June 2020. In it, the IAU recognizes that this is a broader issue than that of Black Lives Matter alone since similar or even worse atrocities happen elsewhere in the world. As one of its actions to stimulate inclusiveness, the IAU has launched a [SpringBoard to Action on Equity, Inclusion and Diversity](#) (EID) in January 2021, following IAU Symposium 358 on this topic in Japan in November 2019. Activities are led by our IAU working group on EID, which reports directly to the Executive Committee, underlining its importance. Finally, our IAU 100 years celebrations in 2019 had EID at the core of all of its activities with society at large, more than 5000 events in total reaching more than 100 million people worldwide (see [final IAU100 report](#) and material posted at [www.iau-100.org](http://www.iau-100.org)).

Second, we would like to provide SCNAT with some general background on how the IAU names surface features on the many different solid bodies in the solar system (see [www.iau.org/public/themes/naming](http://www.iau.org/public/themes/naming)). Any naming needs to follow a number of rules; in particular all features with phenomenologically identical appearances have to receive the same descriptor term (e.g. crater, valles, montes, etc.) and a name that fits the related assigned theme/category.

The assigned themes are manifold. To give some examples: on Mercury all montes are named after “Words for hot in various languages”, and on Mars all small valles are named after “Classical or modern names of rivers”. Craters are often named after people. On Mercury these names follow the theme: “Artists, musicians, painters, and authors who have made outstanding or fundamental contributions to their field and have been recognized as art historically significant figures for more than 50 years”, and on the Moon the names follow the theme: “Scientists, engineers, and explorers, as well as other persons connected with astronomy, planetary, or space research who have made outstanding or fundamental contributions to their field”.

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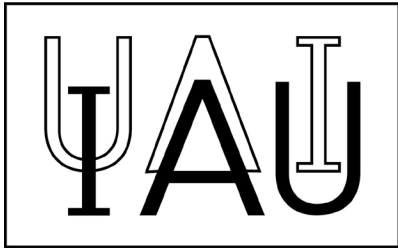
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A surface feature on any solar system body is not named just for the sake of it, but only if it needs to be clearly identified and distinguished from other features for scientific reasons (most notably, identification in scientific papers) or if it is an important landmark. This is also the reason why most of the surface features on solar system bodies have no name.

Once a feature is named, it can be clearly identified and one can then also search for its mention in previous publications. Therefore, the IAU avoids changing any planetary names because there are publications as well as old maps and globes with those names, and it causes confusion in the literature and research to change them. We only consider changing a name if absolutely and demonstratively required.

Third, the specific case of the “Agassiz Promontory”. This controversy is an example of the increasing tendency these days to discredit naming things for now long-dead persons (deceased before the 20<sup>th</sup> century) who have behaved in ways that by today's standards are considered unworthy. Clearly, Agassiz's statements are totally unacceptable today. But they were only marginally so when Agassiz made them in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since at that time there was a widespread belief in many countries that some races (not limited to Caucasians) were genetically at a higher level of civilization than other groups.

Rather than removing the name associated with such a person out of hand, and hence creating a potential problem for future research on that feature, the IAU feels that they should be judged *by the moral standards of their time* rather than those of today. We need to weigh the distasteful actions or opinions of these “long-dead” people against their merits for which naming a feature is being considered. Agassiz, for all of his controversial statements, was not a criminal. He was never accused of participating in the horrors of any Nazi-equivalent regime, nor was he ever tried or convicted for war crimes. On the other hand, he was clearly recognized for his contributions to the field of science. Therefore, in the case of Agassiz, the IAU does not believe that a change of name is absolutely and demonstratively required. In contrast with Agassiz (who lived and died <20<sup>th</sup> century), the cases of Lenard and Stark and their association with the Nazi regime are recent enough that one can make an independent judgement of the morals of that time.

The IAU appreciates that not everybody outside the planetary science community is fully abreast of the requirements for, and the existing rules of, naming surface features on solar system bodies. Therefore, the IAU has put up its naming website [www.iau.org/public/themes/naming](http://www.iau.org/public/themes/naming) as well as the *Gazetteer of Planetary Nomenclature*, providing a detailed overview in multiple languages. To both websites we have now added an item on the topic of controversial names under “Frequently asked Questions (FAQ)” <https://planetarynames.wr.usgs.gov/Page/FAQ> and [www.iau.org/public/faq/#objects-solar-system](http://www.iau.org/public/faq/#objects-solar-system).

We trust that SCNAT appreciates the position of the IAU on this matter. We hereby consider the matter closed.

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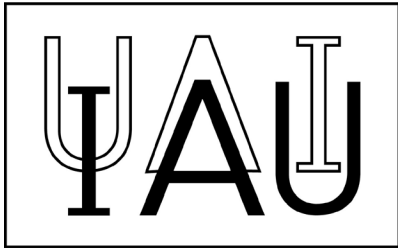
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Sincerely,

Prof. dr. E.F. van Dishoeck  
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*R. Schulz*

Dr. R. Schulz  
Chair, IAU WG Planetary System Nomenclature

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