

What price meteorite collections? Some responses

In an Editorial in the 1996 November issue, I appealed for us to be more conscience of the world's great meteorite collections, listing the largest 30 collections in the Koblitz (1996) database and pointing out that some major collections are not adequately supported, that some small regional collections put meteorites in danger, and that some private collections put meteorites out of the reach of scientific research and may lead to their loss or destruction after the death of the owner. I suggested that the Meteoritical Society publish a statement of responsible meteorite care that could guide curators and maybe help them garner the necessary resources. My editorial attracted some responses that I thought it would be useful to publish.

Rainer Bartoschewitz, owner of the 15th largest collection listed in the editorial, wrote as follows:

Since samples of every meteorite must be available to scientists working on meteorites, it is the duty of each collection to produce catalogues. Modern research requires only 100 mg samples, and I do not know of any collector who would reject requests for such small amounts should sufficient material be available. During my 17 years of owning a collection, I have never received a request for material, while many times I have encouraged researchers to do measurements on my samples. Unfortunately, researchers often want to borrow the whole meteorite and long periods of time pass without word to the owner. Material can disappear during the process.

The fate of the private collections after the demise of the owner can be a problem. However, as Sears mentioned, without the private collection of Harvey Nininger, the Center of Meteorite Studies could not have been formed. Nearly all important private meteorite collections are absorbed into institutional collections after their owners death, sometimes before. Of course, private collectors spent a lot of time and money gathering their collections, and while most want to preserve the collections, finding an institution to buy it at a reasonable price is sometimes difficult. Institutions should be more imaginative in their arrangements to purchase private collections, for example by purchasing in monthly installments to ensure the collector a regular income while not straining the institution.

Many governments have declared meteorites state property, but I believe the only reasonable claims on a rock coming from space are those of the owner of the fall or find site or the finder. If researchers force more governments to make laws that declare meteorites state property, the black market in meteorites will boom and the already high price of meteorites will skyrocket. I suggest that governments be encouraged to make laws that require meteorite owners, whether private or public, to make small samples available for research and to publish regular catalogues of samples and their masses. Professional researchers, who do not have to pay for the material themselves, can develop a sense of complacency and forget the value of the material they are dealing with. Unfortunately, there are some badly damaged meteorite samples in major collections.

As a member of the Meteoritical Society, I believe that it is not necessary to distinguish between public and private ownership of meteorites. Everyone in our Society understands the value of mete-

orites. The problem concerns collections that are owned by persons who are not connected with the Society. The Meteoritical Society should prepare a series of statements about responsible policies for meteorite curation and accessibility and attempt to have this incorporated into national environmental laws. After meteorite research, I think this should be the primary role for our Society.

The Meteoritical Society should not work towards centralizing the meteorite collections in the national museums. There is no lack of material for research purposes for the foreseeable future. The national collections contain hundreds of uninvestigated specimens and are constantly being increased by expeditions to cold and hot deserts. The small advantages of centralization are outweighed by the big disadvantages: fewer laypeople will be able to view the samples and there will be fewer local experts to explain the Science and help find new meteorites. The Bartoschewitz Collection recognizes and accepts its responsibilities in all these respects.

F. L. Sutherland, Head of the Mineral Section of the Australian Museum, wrote as follows:

I read the editorial with interest and am gratified that the topic has been raised. However, one point I raise is whether the list of top meteorite collections is complete as institutions in the Southern Hemisphere may be missing. Two in Australia could be candidates, namely the Western Australian Museum in Perth, which includes 14,000 meteorite and tektite specimens, and the Australian Museum in Sydney, which includes 750 meteorites and 2,500 tektites (Petersen *et al.*, 1994).

Certainly the appeal for safeguarding collections rings home. Even when collections are under careful curation, vigilance is needed. Some years back, building alterations in an area next to the meteorite collections in the Australian Museum changed the air flow resulting in quick deterioration of some meteorites that needed immediate restoration.

Derek Sears
Editor

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