Meteoritics & Planetary Science 33, A3 (1998)

Nature's bounty

Not too long ago, maybe 20–30 years, the discovery of a new meteorite in the prairies of north America or the deserts of Australia was a novel event. However, people of unusual enterprise, like Harvey Nininger, could just about make a living dealing in meteorites. With the help of newspaper articles, brochures, public lectures and technical papers, they could make a living by cutting the meteorites into small pieces and offering them for sale. How things have all changed! At a guess, I would say that there are now ~100 meteorite dealers. Hardly a week goes by without a new meteorite dealer contacting *Meteoritics & Planetary Science* for help.

Some of my thoughts about dealers and private ownership of meteorites were the theme of an earlier editorial (Sears, 1996b). This supplementary issue of *Meteoritics & Planetary Science* carries the saga a little further forward. By dint of gargantuan efforts on the part of Jeff Grossman, editor of the *Meteoritical Bulletin*, and his colleagues in Paris, Mainz, Münster, Houston and Milton Keynes, the present bulletin contains entries for ~1000 meteorites, ~400 of which are from the Sahara. I wonder how many of us realize that the best source of new meteorites after Antarctica now is north Africa (Table 1), rather than north America or Australia. The reasons for so many meteorites are no doubt similar to those at work in north America and Australia: a dry environment and low indigenous population density.

But the meteorites do not present themselves to the community without help. The reason so many meteorites are coming out of north Africa is a number of energetic private dealers. This year, more than 400 of the north African meteorites were discovered by just a handful of people. The newly announced meteorites form a remarkably valuable collection, with a winonaite (Hammadah al Hamra 193), a group of CO3 chondrites (probably all paired with Dar al Gani, DaG 005), two CK chondrites (DaG 250 and DaG 275), a eucrite (DaG 276), two ureilites (DaG 319 and DaG 340), a CH chondrite (or bencubbinite, DaG 237), a lunar meteorite (DaG 400), an LL7 chondrite (Sahara 97037), a major EH3 group (Sahara 97096) and many type 3 ordinary chondrites (DaG 225, DaG 313, 315, 327, 353, 369, 378, Grein 001, Sahara 97072, 97210). The work involved in recovering, classifying and publishing details for these meteorites is impressive and a tribute to everyone involved.

For those of us involved in large-scale modern meteorite recovery programs, trying to figure out pairings and accumulation mechanisms, and whether these data have any significance in understanding past climates and so on, one crucial piece of information is missing from many of the north African meteorite descriptions in the *Meteoritical Bulletin*. It is the field location. One of the collectors is a dealer, and he understandably wants to protect his interests. The rare and valuable meteorites will be rare and valuable whether or not we know their find site. They are scientific treasures in any event. But the majority of the samples are weathered ordinary chondrites of considerably less commercial value. Their major interest lies in what they can tell us about concentration mechanisms and climate changes and their value is considerably less without location information. The dealer will make his profits, but Science pays a price.

The situation is analogous to the dealers raiding archeological sites for jewelry and gold and not recording their find sites. The mentality is that there is plenty for everyone and scientists will find other sites in the future that they can properly document. But there has been only one Tutankhamun. Meteorite recovery at the end of the twentieth century is where archeology was in the mid-nineteenth century. This loss of location information in the face of commercialism is one more difficulty to add to those I described in my earlier editorial (Sears, 1996b).

TABLE 1. Numbers of meteorites announced each year, excluding Antarctic meteorites*

	"Normal"	RC	Nullarb	Sahara	Total
1998	27	4	21	401	453
1997	28	0	0	133	161
1996	16	0	10	110	136
1995	24	12	17	0	53
1994	22	0	13	104	139
1993	26	4	15	167	212
1992	32	4	36	181	253
1991	26	0	1	85	112
1990	26	5	34	20	85
1989	24	35	0	38	97
1988	25	0	0	0	25
1987	21	0	0	0	21
1986	10	0	1	0	11
1985	21	31	0	0	52

*"Normal" refers to other sites; RC, Roosevelt county, New Mexico; Nullarb, Nullarbor Region, South and Western Australia.

A bounty of an entirely different sort is the collection of papers appearing in this issue. When the abstracts of the annual meeting and the *Meteoritical Bulletin* were moved from the regular journal to the supplement in 1996 (Sears, 1996a), we expected that routine descriptions of new meteorites would also be placed in the supplement. We accepted that as a society journal we had an obligation to publish material the Society wanted published that would not be appropriate for a major international journal. We have a record number of such papers in the present supplement. The same course of logic has caused us to accept two papers that are essentially data compilations and a paper that shows some of the most beautiful meteorite magnetite structures ever published. We are grateful to the authors for letting us publish the fruits of their labors this way.

The final bounty is, of course, the abstracts of the Meteoritical Society annual meeting that is held in Dublin this year. As usual the organizers have been marvelously cooperative in producing this volume, and the staff at the Lunar and Planetary Institute, Houston, and in the *Meteoritics & Planetary Science* office have been a joy to work with. This year the workload has been especially high, with a large supplement appearing with a record-sized July issue. It is a source of pleasure to me that few people outside these two offices realize just what an achievement it is each year because the process runs so smoothly. This year our colleagues took the abstracts from initial submission to publication in a technical journal in about two months, while working on a bumper supplement and a bumper July issue.

Derek Sears
Editor

REFERENCES

SEARS D. W. G. (1996a) The reponsibilities of a journal owned by a learned Society. *Meteorit. Planet. Sci.* **31 (Suppl.),** A3–A4.

SEARS D. W. G. (1996b) What price meteorite collections? *Meteorit. Planet. Sci.* **31,** 695–696.