

Florida man charged in NY dinosaur fossils case

October 17 2012, by Suzette Laboy

(AP)—A Florida man was charged Wednesday with smuggling dinosaur fossils into the United States, including a nearly complete Tyrannosaurus Bataar skeleton from Mongolia, federal prosecutors said.

Eric Prokopi, a self-described "commercial paleontologist" who buys and sells whole and partial dinosaur skeletons, was arrested at his home in Gainesville, according to a complaint unsealed by prosecutors. He was charged with smuggling goods into the U.S. and interstate sale and receipt of stolen goods.

He also faces one count of conspiracy to smuggle illegal goods, possess stolen property and make false statements. If convicted on all of the charges, he could face up to 35 years in prison.

During an appearance Wednesday in federal court in Gainesville, U.S. District Judge Gary R Jones ordered Prokopi to be held on \$100,000 bond. He must also surrender his passport and will be under home detention. A phone message left with his attorney by The Associated Press was not immediately returned.

The arrest was handled by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations.

Manhattan U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara said the investigation "uncovered a one-man black market in prehistoric fossils." The U.S. government seized the Tyrannosaurus skeleton earlier this year after it

was sold by an auction house for \$1.05 million.

Prokopi did not immediately respond to a phone call, but his attorney has said he did nothing wrong.

Prokopi has been involved in a lawsuit in New York over the auction because the Mongolian government has said it may belong to that country. Prokopi's attorney in the lawsuit, Michael McCullough, has said his client is entitled to keep the creature he spent a year putting together at great expense.

McCullough has said the U.S. government was incorrect when it alleged that the skeleton pieces were brought into the country in one \$15,000 shipment. He said there were three other shipments and only 37 percent of the completed skeleton came from one specimen.

Federal prosecutors said Prokopi misrepresented the identity, origin and value of the skeleton of the *Tyrannosaurus bataar*, a dinosaur that lived approximately 70 million years ago.

Prokopi also is accused of illegally importing from Mongolia the skeleton of a *Saurolophus*, another dinosaur from the late Cretaceous period that he sold to a gallery in California along with fossils of two other dinosaurs native to Mongolia, *Gallimimus* and *Oviraptor mongoliensis*. He also imported the fossilized remains of a *Microraptor*, a small, flying dinosaur from China, the complaint said.

Prokopi brought the fossils into the country between 2010 and 2012, prosecutors said.

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