

Plan to move Argentine meteorite to Germany blocked

1 February 2012, by Liliana Samuel

An unlikely alliance between the native Moqoit people and leading Argentine scientists has thwarted plans to ship the world's second largest meteorite to Germany as a prestigious art exhibit.

The 37-ton space rock crashed to Earth as part of a [meteor shower](#) between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago, forming a giant 48,000 square kilometer crater field in northeastern Argentina known as Campo del Cielo, or Field of the Sky.

Named El Chaco after the province it fell into, the meteorite is central to the world view of the native Moqoit people, many of whose legends, passed down from generation to generation, are based on the meteor shower.

The Moqoit First Nation was decimated following the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century and today there are only about 15,000 natives left, living mainly in far northeastern Argentina.

A controversy erupted when the Chaco provincial legislature in December approved a request by a pair of Buenos Aires-based artists to ship the meteorite to Germany to feature in the Documenta modern art exhibition.

The artists, Guillermo Faivovich and Nicolas Goldberg, organized a similar exhibit in Frankfurt in 2010, when they put on display for the first time the complete "El Taco" meteorite.

The smaller, two-ton [space rock](#) was discovered in 1962 in Campo del Cielo by an Argentine-US expedition, which promptly divided the find and sent half each to the respective countries.

Faivovich and Goldberg hoped El Chaco -- second in size only to the 60-ton Hoba meteorite in Namibia -- would be the centerpiece of the Documenta show, which runs from June 9 until September 16 in Kassel, Germany.

Theresa Durnbeck, who heads the province's economic development office, claims that putting the meteorite on show in Germany would encourage tourism in Chaco, one of Argentina's poorest regions.

"More than a million people from different parts of the world visit the Documenta show," she said. "For the province it would be an opportunity hard to repeat, and impossible to reach with its own resources."

Not so fast, said the Moqoit natives, supported by a coalition of scientists, astronomers, anthropologists, and defenders of Argentina's heritage.

Earlier this month more than 40 prominent Argentine astronomers wrote an open letter saying they "energetically opposed" the plans, and that taking the meteorite to Germany "violates the rights of the Chaqueno natives."

Instead of shipping the rock "as a sort of 'cosmic curiosity' it would be much better" to encourage people to visit the meteorite at its home in Chaco province, the letter read.

The plan was for the rock to begin mid-February its 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) odyssey from Chaco to the port of Buenos Aires. From there it was to be shipped to Germany before being hauled to Kassel overland.

"It's madness," said Jorge Castillo, who heads both an environmentalist organization and a group protecting the heritage of Chaco province.

"The El Chaco meteorite is not leaving Chaco province," Castillo told AFP. "It is part of the province's cultural and natural heritage "and it must remain in its place," he said. "It is not merchandise."

Upon learning of the controversy, the Documenta

organizers in Germany decided to suspend their request to borrow the meteorite.

"No loan of the El Chaco [meteorite](#) will be further requested without a full endorsement by the peoples of the land of Chaco, by the local community as a whole, and in careful consideration of the beliefs and principles of the traditional custodians today," the organizers said in a statement.

But efforts are ongoing and the statement noted that the two artists were "currently meeting with all concerned parties" to discuss the matter.

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