NEW REGULATION IN MOROCCO ON METEORITES AND GEOHERITAGE.

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Introduction: Morocco is known for the high number of meteorites collected in its territory, including finds and falls. Meteorite finds from Morocco and Northwest Africa are second only to Antarctica. This is explained by the large size of the Moroccan Sahara, the guarantee of security in this desert, and the big community of well-trained Moroccan hunters and nomads who roam through it. A few of the finds are submitted to the Nomenclature committee of the Meteoritical Society alongside their coordinates and bear the names of the places they were found. The nomenclature system changed a few years ago from a single name with coordinates for each meteorite to a systematic Dense Collection Areas nomenclature for rectangular areas. Despite this richness, there are only a rare number of meteorite expositions or museums available in Morocco, and a few Moroccan collectors; and the national collection of meteorites contains a ridiculously limited number of samples compared to the total of officially known ones. All meteorites collected in Morocco are sold abroad and exported.

History: The exportation of meteorites as well as other geoheritage samples such as fossils and minerals were not completely official as there was no dedicated regulation. This activity was not clearly declared anywhere as legal or illegal. Meteorite traders from Morocco exported them under the local commercial regulation but without clearly specifying what was being exported. Since 2000, the APPGM (Association Pour la Protection du Patrimoine Géologique du Maroc), an NGO dedicated to the preservation of the Moroccan geoheritage began working with the Moroccan Geological Survey, which belongs to the Ministry of Energy and Mining, on a draft of a specific law dedicated to geoheritage. The first draft of this law included one sentence concerning meteorites “Meteorites are important geoheritage, their collection, sale and exportation is totally prohibited”. Since 2004, after the author joined the APPGM as member of the director board, a lot of work went into explaining the situation of meteorites in Morocco and its surrounding countries. It was fundamental to show their scientific importance for researchers all over the world and to benefit from the experience of other countries with a high number of meteorites where exportation is not allowed and that are losing their meteorites to illegal exportation. The author recommended a clever win-win regulation, which would allow the legal collection and exportation of meteorites under clear rules benefiting hunters, scientists as well as the country.

The new regulation: The conception of the law dedicated to geoheritage is still in progress. In 2014, Morocco updated its law regarding mines. The APPGM suggested including regulations on geoheritage in this law. One article cited geoheritage including fossils, minerals and meteorites and mentioned that their collection and exportation will be regulated by decree. In 2019, the Moroccan Geological Survey suggested to work on the application decree of this article that will be much easier to concretize. They, alongside the APPGM, prepared this decree that was discussed and approved by the Moroccan government and implemented in February 2020. This decree is regulating the collection and exportation of geoheritage. Now, in Morocco, people may officially have a permit for hunting and exporting meteorites while supplying information about the place of collection and the type of the meteorites that were collected. A small part of the meteorite goes to the Moroccan Geological Survey. This situation is unique in the region as well as compared to the other countries with a high potential of meteorites collection.

Conclusion/recommendation: Although the situation allows the legal collection and exportation of meteorites, only a very limited number of people respect this regulation. Meteorite researchers and collectors all over the world should be aware of this regulation in Morocco and ask that local traders respect it to make their acquisitions legal and to encourage the huge effort made to make this activity as transparent as possible: it is an important ethical and scientific responsibility of our community.