

THE AUSTRALIAN

Bounty sets off hunt for meteorite pieces

MARK FRANCHETTI THE SUNDAY TIMES (UK) FEBRUARY 18, 2013 12:00AM



A meteor streaks through the sky over Chelyabinsk, about 1500km east of Moscow. Source: AP

THE Russian city where the biggest meteorite to hit earth in more than 100 years crashed last week is facing a gold rush, with collectors offering more than \$15,000 for a fragment of the rock.

A day after the fireball streaked across the sky and exploded with the force of an atomic bomb, residents in Chelyabinsk were out in force searching for pieces to sell. Potential buyers posted messages on the Russian internet calling on finders to come forward. One Russian buyer offered 500,000 roubles (\$16,000) for a single fragment.

At a frozen reservoir outside the nearby town of Chebarkul, where the largest meteorite pieces are thought to have crashed, authorities stopped "meteorite hunters" searching around a 8m-wide crater punched in the ice by the impact.

"Off to look for pieces of meteorite! Who knows, maybe I'll strike gold!" a local resident called Sergei wrote online.

"The web is awash with people saying they want to buy this stuff," said Oleg Karpov, another Chelyabinsk local. "Maybe this thing was not that bad after all if a few of us make some money out of it."

Hours after the blast, in which 1200 people were injured, mostly by flying glass, dozens went online to claim to have pieces of meteorite to sell.

According to the astronomer Phil Plait, author of *Death from the Skies*, the high value of some of the fragments will attract meteorite hunters from around the world. The fragment that hit the lake was, he estimated, more than 90cm in diameter. Steven Spielberg, the Hollywood director, is among several well-known collectors of meteorite fragments.

A 23cm piece of the Seymchan meteorite found in Siberia in 1960 sold in New York for \$43,750 in October.

Plait said: "Having fragments from a known fall - and one with so much amazing footage and drama - means collectors will be all over this."

However, another collector urged caution. "The value of the fragments depends entirely on what they are made of. They could be valuable or could be worthless," he said.

THE SUNDAY TIMES