

Fossil dealer charged over Russian cache

[MUNICH] Russian prosecutors are hoping that the arrest of a German fossil dealer prevented from taking fossils and meteorites out of Russia may help them to track down a group they suspect of being involved in the theft of fossils from Russian museums.

Joachim Wördemann was stopped on 21 December trying to drive an estimated 1,000 kg of large meteorites, minerals and fossil material over the border into Finland. He appeared in a St Petersburg court on 5 January charged with irregularities in export documentation and failure to provide export licences for around ten per cent of the items.

Although most of the items had export licences issued by the Ministry of Culture, these licences are being investigated by police. Many were countersigned by directors of the

Institute for Palaeontology in Moscow, part of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which officially advises the ministry on the scientific value of fossils intended for export. Fossils identified as scientifically important are not eligible for export.

The directors of the institute have been strongly criticized by Russian palaeontologists for operating an opaque system of administration that scientists in the institute claim often conflicts with its scientific interests (see *Nature* 384, 499; 1996).

Moreover, the directors have been caught up in a scandal over the theft of many important fossil specimens from the institute's museum, which is now the subject of a criminal investigation (*Nature* 391, 724; 1998).

In 1994, Wördemann himself was stopped

from selling a fossil originating from the institute — a *Thoosuchus jacoblevi* skull worth US\$950 — but he denied being involved in the theft and police lacked sufficient evidence to bring a prosecution (see *Nature* 371, 729; 1994). Following his recent arrest, German police are once more investigating his past activities.

At the request of the Russian ministry of the interior, the police are gathering information from collectors and museums about any contacts they may have had with Wördemann. Wördemann's Russian fossils have, until last year, been for sale — cash only — at fairs and privately in Germany since 1989, says Rupert Wild, head of the palaeontological department of the State Museum for Natural History in Stuttgart.

Wördemann visits Russia twice a year and is a regular visitor to the palaeontology institute. After his arrest in St Petersburg, he was sent to Moscow where he spent several days answering questions from police; this was believed to be in connection with the investigation into the situation at the institute.

Meanwhile, customs officials called in a scientist from the Zoological Institute in St Petersburg to check whether Wördemann's collection included a mammoth tusk that had recently gone missing from the institute; it did not. Other institute scientists expect to be asked for advice on the scientific value of fossils in the load during the next few weeks.

Items likely to be considered scientifically important include complete baby mammoth skulls from the Southern Urals which show developing teeth, and many cave bear skeletons and skulls. The load also includes mammoth tusks, ammonites and trilobites of unknown scientific value. The total market value in the West could be millions of dollars.

Scientists at the palaeontology institute have long suspected that the fossils disappearing regularly from their museum were being smuggled out of the country by a criminal network whose members, they deduced, appeared to include both institute members and customs officials. Four years ago they pinpointed the customs office through which they were probably being funnelled; this was the same office at which Wördemann was arrested.

Afraid to talk in case they lost their jobs, and failing to win support from the Academy of Sciences, the scientists eventually managed to interest politicians, who initiated an investigation by public prosecutors.

In a television broadcast, the national public prosecutor said the Russian authorities were cracking down on organized crime rings, which, he said, were stripping Russia of her national heritage. He said Wördemann's arrest was the first time police had stopped an apparent smuggler at a border. **Alison Abbott**

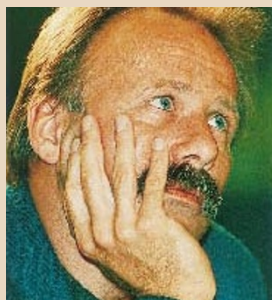
Greens accept reprieve for neutron source

[MUNICH] The German Social Democrats (SPD) last week blocked a move by the federal environment minister Jürgen Trittin, a leading member of the Greens, to stop the licensing of new research reactors with a thermal power of more than 1 MW.

Trittin had specifically called for the termination of the licensing procedure for FRM II, the 20-MW neutron source being built by the Technical University of Munich at Garching (see *Nature* 397, 92; 1999).

But the Greens and Social Democrats agreed during last week's coalition talks on nuclear policy to exclude research reactors from proposed legislation on the phasing out of nuclear power. They also agreed to set up an independent committee of scientific experts to reconsider whether the FRM II could be converted to use low enriched uranium (LEU).

The FRM II has been designed to burn weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU), contravening a 1978 international anti-nuclear proliferation agreement. The decision not to block the licensing of such reactors was described as "a bitter pill" by Harald Händel, spokesman of the Green



Trittin: his attempts to block FRM II seem to have failed.

party's executive. Party leaders, he says, are aware that the grass roots will have little sympathy for the compromise: "but at the end of the day it was all that was possible politically."

Wolf-Michael Catenhusen (SPD), secretary of state in the federal research ministry, welcomes the compromise, which, he says, "guarantees that Germany will be able to keep up its options in neutron research". But he stresses that the political desire to convert the FRM II to use LEU remains.

The new committee will have until June to formulate recommendations about whether conversion is "technically and financially feasible". The federal government will then discuss the reactor's final design with the Bavarian state government, which is

responsible for issuing the operating licence.

The composition of the committee has not yet been decided. Catenhusen told *Nature*, however, that it will consist of prominent neutron researchers, including experts from the Technical University of Munich.

He says it will also include experts from the US Argonne National Laboratory, who last year published a report saying that they saw "no major technical issues regarding use of LEU fuel instead of HEU fuel in the FRM II", and "that it is definitely feasible to use LEU fuel in the FRM II without compromising the safety or performance of the facility".

Meanwhile, the Technical University of Munich is keen to present its critics with a *fait accompli* by ensuring that FRM II building work continues as fast as possible, daily increasing the costs of redesigning the reactor.

Armando Travelli, head of Argonne's reactor conversion programme, fears such costs could be "immense", and that this could be used as an argument not to convert the reactor. But Catenhusen has indicated that the federal government would contribute to the conversion costs. **Quirin Schiermeier**