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Meteor may appear on film

By Nick Buchan
December 05, 2005

From: NEWS.com.au

WESTERN Australia's chief meteorite expert is hopeful a prototype camera network will help him track down a meteor which lit up the skies of WA over the weekend.

Astronomers believe the meteorite, flashing brightly and sending out sonic booms, smashed into the earth's atmosphere about 300km southeast of Perth at 8.47pm (WST) Saturday.

The spectacle was reported in WA's north, as far east as Kalgoorlie - nearly 500km from Perth - and in the south at Albany, more than 400km from the capital.

While thousands of people reported seeing and hearing the meteor fly overhead, authorities have little idea where it landed, with thousands of square kilometres of West Australian territory virtually uninhabited.

Despite the lack of witnesses, Dr Alex Bevan, curator of meteorology at Western Australian Museum, has high hopes that an experimental horizon-wide camera network will help him pinpoint the meteorite's landing zone.

"I would go and look for it right now, but I wouldn't have any idea where to start," Dr Bevan said. "Western Australia is a huge place. Even if we narrowed it down to an area of five square kilometres, it would take me three weeks to search it."

The answer may lie with an experimental camera system currently being installed on the Nullabor Plain.

A joint project between WA Museum, London's Imperial College and a similar project in the Czech Republic, the cameras have been successfully trialled for the past 18 months in WA's eastern goldfields.

Each night the camera exposes a plate that takes a picture of the heavens from horizon to horizon. Dr Bevan said if the cameras had been assembled in time, there is a chance the meteor was caught on film, and its crash zone could be found by combining the data from the three cameras.

"Each plate is a record of what happens each night - we would be able to work out the velocity, direction and possible landing zone of the meteor," Dr Bevan said.

Even if a landing site could be determined, the odds aren't high that the meteorite could be found. After all, unless you see it hit the ground, a meteorite looks like just another rock.

"Meteorites can lose 80% of their mass upon hitting the Earth's atmosphere," Dr Bevan said.

"The fireball produced is much bigger than the meteorite, but even though it can be quite frightening, this was not a crater-producing event."

Dr Bevan says more than 7000 "recoverable" meteorites fall to Earth each year.

If everything goes to plan, Dr Bevan hopes to go hunting for the meteorite sometime next week.



Night sky ... more than 7000 meteors rain down on the Earth's surface every year / file

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