



FOUR TONS OF FOSSILS

Recovery and return of four tons of fossils illegally taken out of Argentina

■ Marcelo Daniel El Haibe

Chief Commissioner, Division of Cultural Heritage
INTERPOL - Argentina

On February 10, 2006, the National Centre for Cultural Heritage Protection received an anonymous call from the United States of America. The person on the phone advised that an international fair of palaeontology was being held at a hotel under the Howard Johnson Chain in the city of Tucson, Arizona. At the event, Rhodo Co. was offering for sale a large number of fossils of animal and plant origin which, as was indicated in the stand, were from Argentina.

The INTERPOL National Central Bureau immediately informed the National Federal Criminal and Correctional Court No. 10 with Dr. Julian Ercolini acting as president and Dr. Gustavo Cristofani as secretary. The Bureau let its U.S. counterpart (INTERPOL Washington) know about the event for corroboration. It asked to have the pieces confiscated if the information was correct. This was achieved with support from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.

After a thorough investigation, it was determined that the fossilized pieces had been sent from southern Argentina to the province of Catamarca, where Rhodo Co. is in charge of mining operations. The fossils left the country for the United States under a company license to export different types of mineral ores, especially rhodochrosite. These fossils were concealed in mineral ore shipments to dodge customs authorities.

This case was submitted to the National Economic Criminal Court No. 2 with Dr. Marcelo Aginsky acting as president

and Dr. Hernán Pandiella as secretary, under No. 193/2006 "NN S / INFRACCIÓN A LA LEY 22.515 (CONTRABANDO)." The case is currently being reviewed by the National Economic Criminal Prosecutor's Office No. 2 with Dr. Emilio M. Guerberoff acting as president and Dr. Daniel Schurjin Almenar as secretary.

The fossils were seized by ICE personnel at the request of INTERPOL, following orders from the court auditor. They were analyzed by U.S. experts with advice from leading national experts, concluding that they had indeed come from Argentina and were under Law 25.743 (Protection of archaeological and paleontological heritage).

After the relevant steps were taken, the four tons of fossils were returned to Argentina on April 23, 2008. It is worth stressing that this has been the largest smuggling of fossils in history.

The following pictures were discreetly taken and submitted on February 8, 2006 by ICE Special Agents. They helped scientists at the Argentinean Museum of Natural History, which is in charge of enforcing Law 25.743 (on Palaeontology), confirm that the fossils came from southern Argentina. The Court Auditor thus requested, by means of a letter rogatory, the immediate seizure of the pieces, which took place on February 12, 2006. [C&D](#)



Moment of the arrival at the Metropolitan Airport. In the picture, Dr. José Mun, Secretary of Culture, and Earl Wayne, Ambassador of United States. Three details of the returnees fossils.