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News From Other Parts

Black Diamonds Gems From Space

If indeed "a diamond is forever," the most primitive origins of Earth's so-called black diamonds were in deep, universal time, geologists have found—they came from space.

The study of the rare black gems, also called carbonado diamonds, comes from a research group including Jozsef Garai and Stephen Haggerty of Florida International University.

The dusky rocks, Haggerty said, may have once been asteroid-sized—a kilometer (0.6 miles) or more in diameter when they first reached Earth.

The scientists based the claims on various factors. They analyzed the diamonds' contents and found them to be similar to certain other diamonds found in meteorites, which also originate in space.

Minute amounts of hydrogen in the carbonado rocks also betrayed a similarity to diamond dust found in hydrogen-rich environments among stars, his group said. In previous research, Haggerty suggested carbonado diamonds formed in stellar explosions called *super novae*.

The term carbonado was coined by the Portuguese in Brazil in the mid-1700s; it's derived from its resemblance to porous charcoal. Black diamonds are found only in Brazil and the Central African Republic.

Conventional diamonds are mined from explosive volcanic rocks called kimberlites that shoot from profound depths to the Earth's surface, said Sonia Esperanca of the National Science Foundation's Division of Earth Sciences, which funded the research. "This process preserves the unique crystal structure that makes diamonds the hardest natural material known."

Diamonds consist of a dense, crystalline form of carbon. But from Australia to Siberia, from China to India, conventional diamonds come from virtually identical geological settings, said Haggerty—none of them compatible with black diamond formation.

About 600 tons of conventional diamonds have been mined, traded, polished and adorned since 1900. But not one black diamond has been discovered in mining fields, added Haggerty, whose news appeared on line Dec. 20 in the journal *Astrophysical Journal Letters*.

Courtesy National Science Foundation and World Science staff