



From top to bottom, Fern fossil, Cranberry Halite, Native Silver.

# Rockhounding: Portrait of a Passion

Rockhounds Survey Report I

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Mineral and fossil collecting has a very long history— dating back to ancient Roman times if not earlier. In many ancient cultures rare and unusual stones with extraordinary qualities were treasured as strong symbols of nature's powers. Several famous Americans like Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Carnegie gave public exposure to this old hobby. The development of optics for amateur astronomy in the 1930s expanded another facet of the hobby—the lapidary arts—the cutting and polishing of rocks and minerals by amateurs. Twentieth century prosperity and labor laws meant that more Americans could pursue leisure time activities like hobbies. Today the rockhound hobbies of rock, mineral and fossil collecting and lapidary arts have developed and grown nationally and internationally and often find their new community online.

In recent decades, hobbyists in many clubs have noted declines in new members and an increasing average age of members, suggesting that younger members in these organizations are on the decline.. The reasons for this decline are speculated on broadly, but remain a question that warrants further study. Discussions by leaders of national associations and on rockhounds discussion groups have periodically probed the puzzle, as have enthusiasts across the nation. This current study of rockhounds emerged as a result of numerous conversations with club officials and discussions on the online discussion group [rockhounds@drizzle.com](mailto:rockhounds@drizzle.com) to discover who rockhounds are, their habits related to their geo-interest, and how they got involved in the hobby.

A web-based survey was administered for a month in the spring of 2005, and 640 responded representing 17 countries. The majority of responses, (87%) were from 46 states in the United States. The survey was advertised on a variety of websites and word of mouth (see notes on last page for survey methods).

## Portrait of a rock collector

According to the recent web survey of 640 rockhounds, the average collector or lapidary got into the hobby in their mid-teens either through a relative, school, a museum, or by going to a rockshow. The responsibilities of young adulthood meant that most collectors and lapidaries put their rocks away while they advanced their careers, went to school and had a family. A large number of rockhounds found their interest reawakened in their mid- to late-thirties or later.

The average collector/lapidary attends 1-5 rock shows per year and is willing to travel up to 1000 miles for at least one of their 1-10 collecting trips annually. The average collector/lapidary is male (70%) of an age that ranges from 10 to 85.

Rockhounds appear to share a number of other interests as well including gardening, photography, various outdoor activities, travel, camping, off-roading, and woodworking/ wood arts.

The hobby holds an appeal that transcends profession or occupation with respondents on the survey ranging from "domestic goddesses" to judges, rocket scientists, secretaries and police officers.

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## Who are Rockhounds?

- Mineral Collectors
- Lapidaries
- Meteorite Collectors
- Fluorescent Mineral Collectors
- Micromounters
- Jewelry Craftsmen
- Flint Knappers

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## Hobby Genesis:

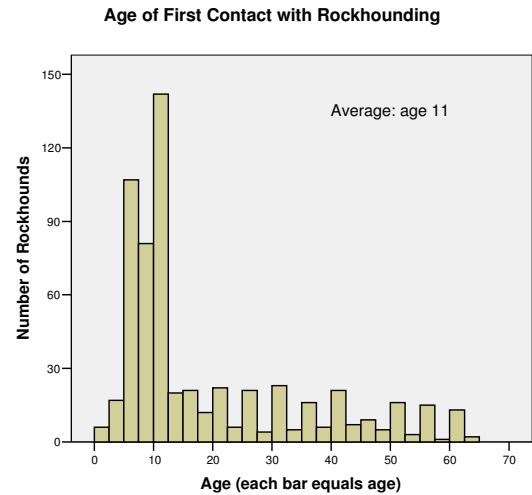
### How do people get interested in the hobby?

Experienced collectors noted a general pattern among adult collectors of an initial spark of interest in childhood that was reignited at some point in ones thirties or forties. The survey tested this observation and the results revealed that indeed this was the case for many collectors. Nearly half of collectors who responded indicated interest as a child at an average age of 11, picking it up again as an adult at an average age of 33. However, 40% reported picking up their interest again after age 40. Approximately one-sixth did not have a break and had a continued interest.

This might indicate that activities that expose children to the geo-sciences or some aspect of collecting at early ages increases the chances of developing a more serious interest later in life.

Many different triggers were responsible for people's initial interest in the hobby. We asked whether any of a group of various activities were related to first exposure to the hobby and found that 15.1% had first exposure through science museums, public library, or other public institutions and 14.2% had exposure through school. The greatest influence affecting interest in the hobby appeared to be through a relative or other adult (37.5%). A separate question asked if it was a family member who was instrumental in first contact, to which 27.6% indicated yes. The open-ended responses revealed a variety of other influential introductions, most prevalent being attendance at a gem and mineral

show triggering later involvement in the hobby. The open responses indicated other triggers such as the serendipitous find of a curious specimen in a driveway or a road cut. It would appear that these first exposures to the hobby combined with natural inquisitiveness resulted in a lifelong interest for many. As one rockhound re-



marked: "I read a book that said you could dissolve limestone in vinegar. I thought that was cool and had to try it. A friend came back and thought the same thing, and we both started rockhounding." The Boy Scouts and the military also provided organized opportunities that generated interest for a handful of respondents each.

### Interest by category

The hobby has many categories such as lapidary arts (cutting and polishing of rough material), mineral collecting, fossil collecting, rock collecting, and subgroups of mineral collecting such as micromounters, meteorite collectors and fluorescent mineral collectors and much more. Sometimes collectors specialize in only one interest, but many more have multiple interests, so respondents could choose multiple categories. The most popular was minerals (391), followed closely by rocks (331), and lapidary (305) and fossils (207). Fluorescent mineral collectors (97), micromounters (79) and meteorite collectors (61) were the options to choose from.

The online community is composed of a mixture of dealers, collectors and professionals. The respondents identified their primary interest in the hobby and nearly two-thirds (62%) were collectors, a quarter were (25.5%) were lapidaries, 3.6% were dealers, 5% scientists, and 3.6% were educators. We also asked about occupation as it related to the hobby, and 8.4%(47) were geologists,

### Rockhounds: an Inquisitive Bunch

*The serendipitous find of a curious specimen in a driveway or a road cut was the trigger that sparked a lifelong interest in the hobby for some.*



Collecting experiences during childhood may form a permanent bond with the hobby.

1.8%(10) were in museum curation, 8.8% were scientists (49), 5% were specimen dealers (28), and 24.6% were retired.

### Collecting habits

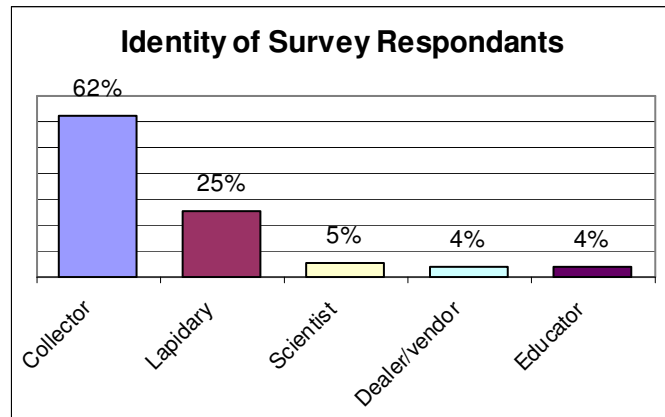
Because of the variety of different interests encompassed by the hobby, some enthusiasts like lapidaries reported they don't field collect as much as hunt for raw material (termed "rough") and don't go to shows. Field collecting is more common to those interested in rocks, minerals, fossils, etc., however, even micromounters reported not going to shows as often as other hobbyists. Future papers will explore the habits of the different groups

As with any hobby, there is a wide spectrum of interest level or passion. An unusual way to measure level of interest was to ask whether rockhounds have ever called off work in order to go collecting. More than one third admitted to calling off work to collect (40%).

**Collecting trips.** The majority, more than two-thirds (67.4%) of respondents indicated they make between 1-10 collecting trips per year to self-collect. Nearly a fifth (18.8%) make between 11-20 trips per year to collect, 6.3% make between 21-30 trips per year. A small percentage (3.7%) make 51 or more trips per year.

**How far will you go?** We asked how far will you travel to go collecting, to which the greatest percentage of responses, 36.3%, indicated they would travel more than 1,000 miles. The next largest percentage, 22.9% would travel 101-300 for collecting, and 2.9% would travel less than 25 miles only.

**Going the Distance.** But what is the furthest respondents have ever traveled with the primary reason to collect? Over one third (36.4%) indicated over 1,000 miles. 90% of respondents had traveled 101 miles or more with the primary reason to



collect and two-thirds of respondents had traveled over 301 miles.

### Shows and Symposiums

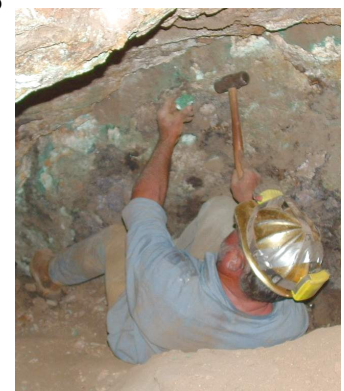
Of interest to club officials and society leadership was to understand willingness to travel to attend gem and mineral shows, or educational symposiums. This is valuable information for planning and promoting of shows. These shows, as indicated above, are very important for budding collectors, as it appears to be influential in first contact with the hobby and simultaneously important for the survival of clubs and societies that work very hard to pull off these shows. In addition, these shows are the lifeblood for many vendors and dealers who provide access to specimens from around the world, places most collectors will never be able to access themselves. So the questions of how many shows and how far are collectors and hobbyists willing to travel to go to a rock show is important for the continuing existence of the hobby from many perspectives. The largest percentage of respondents, 32% indicated a willingness to travel up to 100 miles, followed by 26% willing to go 101-300 miles, and 16% willing to travel more than 1000 miles.

*More than one-third admitted to calling off from work to go collecting (40%).*

This latter distance of more than 1000 miles may reflect those willing to travel to Tucson, Denver or Quartzite, but not necessarily to other regional shows. This result

### Survey Stats

- \*640 responses in one months time
- \* 87% from USA
- \*13% from 16 other countries on 5 continents



*Collecting is sometimes vigorous work; is it a fountain of youth for some?*

should be treated with caution by clubs planning shows and thinking of expending resources on promotion more than 300 miles away. It is possible that these responses may be skewed by dealers.

**How many shows do respondents attend per year on average?**

The vast majority, more than three-quarters (79%) attend between 1-5 shows a year, followed by 17.8% attending 6-10 shows. Minute numbers attend more shows per year and most likely reflect the dealers among respondents.

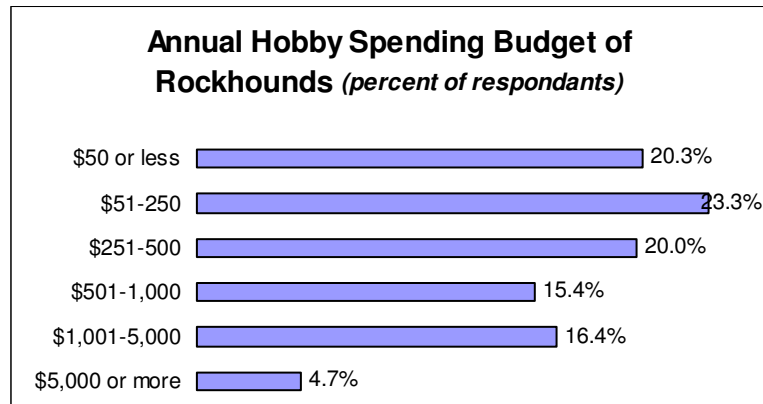
Educational symposiums are conducted by many societies and clubs, featuring guest speakers, scientists, and other specialists. How far were survey respondents willing to travel for these events? Following the results of willingness to travel to shows, 35% were willing to travel up to 100 miles, nearly a quarter (22.5%) willing to travel up to 300 miles, and nearly a fifth willing to travel more than 300 miles. More than half (57.8%) were not willing to travel more than 100 miles.

**Acquiring Specimens**

How hobbyists obtain their specimens and the composition of their collections was of much interest to the Rockhounds online community. More than half of respondents had purchased specimens online (56.7%). A fifth of hobbyists reported spending \$50 or less per year while 23.3% budgeted \$51-250, followed by 20% spending \$251-500, 15.4% spending \$501-1,000, 16.4% spending \$1,001-5000, and 4.7% spending more than \$5,000. Because of the mixture of dealers and collectors, this question is problematic as it doesn't ask specifically if this is spending for your collection, or for your business. The figures at the higher end of the scale may be skewed if dealers responded with business purchasing budgets.

**Collection Size**

Collectors everywhere contend with a universal problem: how to sort, display and store their ever-growing collections. Some collectors have reflected that their collec-



tions seem to be self-replicating. Discussions in the rockhounds community are quite animated dealing with the problems particular to this hobby—the sheer bulk of the collections. How do collectors store their collections? We asked a few questions to get at this issue, looking at displaying, size, volume and weight of the collection.

How collectors housed their collections was most commonly *all over the house* (39%). The possible responses for this question may reflect the bemusement of collectors and their tolerant partners and families. Although 19.4% displayed their collections mostly in display cases, and 14.6% had a room dedicated to their collection, 14% had them on every available surface of their house. 16.8% stored their collection in neatly sorted display cases and/or boxes. 28.3% stored their collection (or part of it) in a garage/shed/barn.

While some could judge the size of their collection by number of boxes, or the more universal storage medium—beer/soda flats, others had to judge the size by weight.

The size of many collections venture into tonnage, so we asked a question to determine if collections had prevented respondents from moving or been a consideration in accepting a job requiring a move. To this, 10.8% indicated that their collections had been a consideration or prevented them from moving.

U.S. Survey respondents hailed from 46 States, including  
 CA-85  
 TX-36  
 OR-30  
 AZ-24  
 CO-17  
 KY-16



This young collector found a near perfect five-inch crystal her first time collecting at a large quarry in California.

**Quality and Sorting of Collection**

Many collectors, especially those who self-collect in the field, accumulate much material of the same vintage. Most collectors will store the bulk, leaving but the best specimens on display. Nearly half (48%) of respondents displayed between 1-10% of their collection. 12.2% had between 76-100% of their collection on display.

Often, when describing the quality of a mineral specimen, collectors will use the term "museum quality" to indicate the degree of perfection, beauty, quality or uniqueness of a specimen. Nearly half (48.9%) of respondents felt that between 1-10% of their collection was museum quality, followed by 18.6% who felt that 11-25% of their collection was museum quality.

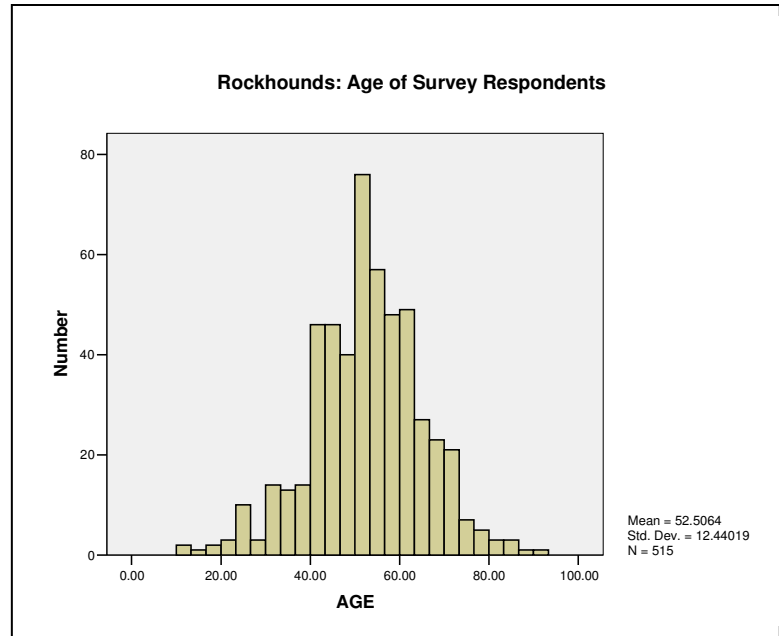
The degree to which collectors are interested in the specifics of their specimens, such as locality, chemical formula, and other details varies greatly. Some collectors will dispose of specimens regardless of beauty if locality information is missing, while others are only interested in the beauty of the specimen. Some collectors will expend great amounts of time cataloguing their collections. We asked about cataloguing, and 32.2% indicate they catalogue their collection. Of these who catalogue, two-thirds (67.8%; n=120) have their catalogues electronically in some type of software.

**What other interests do rockhounds have?**

Rockhound get-togethers usually reveal commonality of other interests. Curious if there were trends of other hobbies rockhounds might have in common, we asked survey takers to indicate three other hobby interests they might have. Among the most popular hobbies were gardening/flowers (79), photography (69), fishing (61), reading (54), hiking (48), travel (48), camping (34), 4-wheeling/off-roading (28), and wood-working/wood arts (29).

**Electronic Gadgets**

Another commonality among collectors was the use of digital cameras. 75.9% of respondents (403) owned a digital camera,



while 59.7% had film cameras and 32.8% indicated they had used a GPS to find a collecting locality.

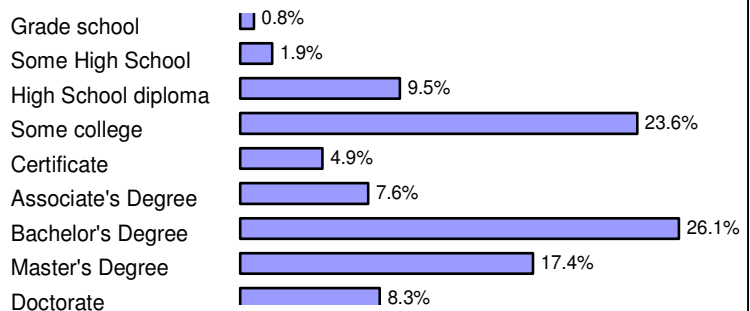
**Demographics**

More than two-thirds (70.5%) of respondents on this survey were male. This is notable as females are generally more likely to respond on surveys. The average age of respondents was 52.4, with the youngest being 10, and the oldest 92. Confirming what many clubs have observed in their membership, half of respondents were over age 53, with the most common age being 55. This chart (above) shows the ages of respondents. It is worth noting that only five respondents were under the age of 21. Given that youth are much more likely to be on line and this survey was almost exclusively online, this may be further evidence to support suspicions that the hobby is not

**Where have all the youth gone?**

*It is worth noting that only five respondents were under the age of 21 despite the fact this survey was conducted using a medium (web) more commonly used by youth.*

**Educational Attainment of Rockhound Survey Takers**



replenishing itself. As most club and society leaders in the hobby know, enthusiasts in clubs tend to be much older, and the data here seem to reflect the general observation.

**Education & Occupations**

One of the more democratic aspects to the hobby is the appeal it holds to a wide variety of people and backgrounds. Of respondents educational backgrounds, 4.9% possessed certificates and 7.6% an associate degree. A little more than a quarter (26.1%) possessed a bachelor's degree, and nearly another quarter possessed graduate degrees; 17.4% with a Master's degree, and 8.3% with a doctorate (Ph.D., J.D., or M.D.).

The diversity of occupations represented requires further analysis to group them into categories, but ranged from singers to judges, "domestic goddess" to veterinarians, teachers, rocket scientists, miners, printers, police officers, real estate agents, secretaries, and scientists. The various aspects of the hobby holds equal opportunity appeal apparently.

**Family Life & the Hobby**

Nearly three-quarters of respondents were married (72%), and had children (73.3%). Of those with children, 68% (257) involved their children in the hobby. Nearly three quarters of respondents strongly agreed (51%) or agreed (30%) that their spouse or significant other supports their hobby. More than half strongly agreed or agreed that their spouses were involved with their hobby, with 22% neutral, and 20% disagreeing.

**Lifelong Learning for Rockhounds**

A final question on the survey asked what would hobbyists most like to learn about related to the hobby. While nearly 500 of respondents answered, there were a few common threads. Geology (115+), cabbing (making cabochons), mineral identifi-

cation, faceting, chemistry, mineralogy and silversmithing/jewelry making were among the most frequent interests rockhounds wanted to learn more about .

**Conclusion**

Rock collecting in all its forms is an aging hobby, dominated by baby boomers and their parents. The interest in rocks, minerals, fossils and lapidary are most often planted early in childhood, and usually reawakened in middle adulthood in the mid-to-late 30s. The most influential in sparking that early interest in the hobby was a relative or other adult, science museum, library or other public institution. Rock and gem shows were cited by many as key in their first exposure to the hobby. Rock collectors come from all income, educational and occupational backgrounds and by nature seem inquisitive and have a variety of other interests. These interests, not surprisingly, cluster around the out-of-doors, the sciences and the practical hands-on activities.

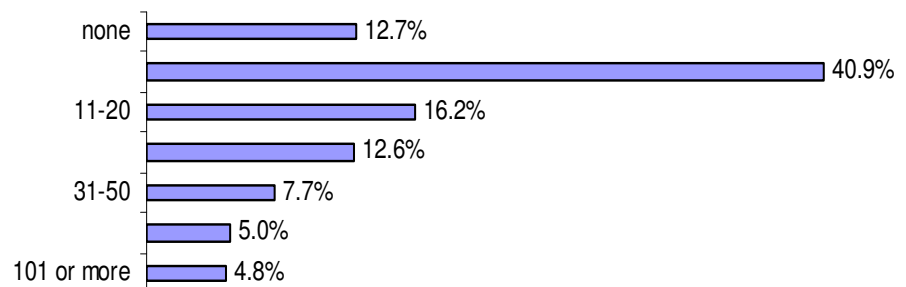
Hobbyists travel to between one and ten shows a year, spend up to \$500 a year on specimens, and will travel up to 300 miles for a show or symposium. The majority of collectors will attend between one and five shows a year, but little more than half will travel beyond 100 miles for a show.

Most hobbyists have families and have involved their children in the hobby. Women may be out-numbered in the hobby three-

**Equal Opportunity Appeal?**

*Rockhounds came from a wide range of occupations ranging from singers to judges, "domestic goddess" to veterinarians, teachers, rocket scientists, miners, printers, police officers, real estate agents, secretaries, and scientists. The various aspects of the hobby hold equal opportunity appeal apparently.*

**How many specimens do you purchase annually for your personal collection?**



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This is the first article planned from this dataset. For information on the data, survey methodology or other inquiries, please contact Tina Tuttle at [tangojuli@yahoo.com](mailto:tangojuli@yahoo.com).

to-one by men. Among respondents, the average age was 52 years old, although the most common age was 55. One quarter of respondents were 60 years old or more. The ages of respondents aged from 10 to 92.

### Implications

The aging of rock clubs may represent a breakdown in the process that previously recaptured the exposed young rockhounds in their emerging adult years. This may also be reflected in the lack of children attending club events. Clubs may want to consider how 'family oriented' their activities are, as this affects both the formative, and confirmed, rockhound's desire to participate in club activities.

Exposure during youth is key for the development and continuation of the hobby. Most clubs are engaged in some types of outreach activities with children, often at their annual shows. While it may be frustrating for members that those children seem to age out of the clubs in their late teens, it appears that the early exposure is a seed that will be sown several decades later. Early experiences at prolific collecting sites was a theme seen in many responses for creating a lasting impression in young collectors. The closure of collecting sites however, was cited by many as problematic for clubs, and clubs and federation leadership should encourage clubs to maintain access to quarries and other collecting sites where at all possible. While promoting access to existing (and possibly lost) sites, clubs also need to actively look into new sites (roadsides, new construction,

outcrops on public land) so they can continue to offer the attractive, and formative, field trips that draw families and rockhounds in.

The finding that rock and gem shows were influential in getting involved in the hobby is something of which clubs and societies should take note. These shows are an excellent opportunity for membership development, and activities that promote involvement of visitors and children will go a long way towards maintaining membership. The other influences listed may help clubs determine where to concentrate their energies. A number of respondents picked up the hobby to have activities to share with their children, and the other family-indicators in the survey would support the efforts of many clubs that promote family activities at their shows and throughout the year.

Given the findings on distances collectors are willing to travel to attend shows, this information can help clubs determine how distant to promote their shows and events. If clubs are not sure if their publicity is having an effect in a city 200 miles away, they may want to survey their visitors. Since so many collectors are online—even older ones—clubs without a website, or without a regularly updated website may find themselves fading into obscurity as the web becomes the premiere information source of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Web discussion groups have shown some evidence that rockhounds who travel may modify their itinerary to include attendance at occasional remote shows and events. An informational club website is equivalent to an ad in the telephone directory for the prospective new club member of all age groups.

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**Special thanks** go to the resourcefulness of Kreigh Tomaszewski who not only helped in the survey development, but was able to use his web connectivity to promote the survey widely on the internet, ensuring a wide distribution and a good response rate from a wide variety of hobbyists in the US and beyond. See <http://Tomaszewski.net/Kreigh/Minerals/MineralLinks.shtml> The [rockhounds@drizzle.com](mailto:rockhounds@drizzle.com) online community also participated in developing survey questions, tweaking questions, and offering great insight into the various aspects of the hobby. This is a community product and thanks go to the entire community. Special appreciation to Kreigh Tomaszewski, J.R. Hodel and Bob Housley who read and commented on earlier drafts and made valuable suggestions. Any errors remaining after this valuable input are the lead author's only.

**Notes on Survey Methodology.** There were many open ended responses to the survey, lengthening the processing time, but gathering much useful information. All surveys have caveats, or limitations in how they represent the whole group because the whole group is not surveyed. These limitations are even more salient given the average age of enthusiasts being in the late 50s or 60s and the decreasing likelihood of their being on the internet to respond to the survey. So the survey was taken by a smaller group of those most likely to be on the web, and who heard about it, and cannot be easily generalized those not on the web. We also do not know what subgroup is not on the web, so we cannot know what percentage of viewpoints we are missing.