



COLLECTOR RESOURCE 03

# What Does "Rare" Actually Mean in Mineral Collecting?

*Why rarity is much more complicated than the word suggests*

## WHAT IS RARE?



The name Rare Minerals Earth makes it fairly obvious that rarity interests me.

When I first became serious about collecting, I was fascinated by minerals that most people had never heard of. Painite, jeremejevite, red beryl and unusual gem minerals immediately caught my attention, particularly when they came from places where the material occurred in tiny quantities.

I assumed rarity was fairly straightforward. Some minerals were common, others were rare, and the rarer ones were naturally more interesting and more expensive.

Selling minerals cured me of that quite quickly.

The first problem was discovering that a rare mineral can still produce a fairly poor specimen.

A mineral may occur in very few places and still be badly formed, heavily damaged or visually underwhelming. From a scientific point of view it remains exactly as rare as it was before, but that does not mean collectors will value every example equally.

Jeremejevite is a good example. It is genuinely unusual as a mineral species and has only been found at a relatively small number of localities, but simply owning a fragment containing jeremejevite is very different from finding a well-formed, attractive crystal with good colour and transparency.

Painite creates much the same problem. Its reputation became enormous because of just how rare it was once considered, but rarity alone does not remove the differences between a tiny incomplete crystal and a specimen with recognisable form, colour and strong provenance.

Finding a rare mineral and finding an exceptional example of it are two separate achievements.

*“Finding a rare mineral and finding an exceptional example of it are two separate achievements.”*

## COMMON CAN BE EXCEPTIONAL



The opposite can happen with common minerals.

There is nothing rare about quartz as a mineral species, but that does not make all quartz ordinary. Swiss Alpine material is an obvious example for me, yet the same argument can be made using completely different localities.

Brandberg quartz can combine amethyst, smoky colour and unusual inclusions in one specimen. Herkimer County can produce remarkably clear crystals naturally terminated at both ends. The Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas have produced exceptionally clear groups that collectors have valued for generations.

None of that makes quartz geologically rare.

It makes particular specimens difficult to replace.

There is also rarity connected with locality.

Crocoite is a useful example because it occurs in more than one place, but the spectacular red crystals from the Dundas district of Tasmania have become so closely associated with the mineral that the locality carries enormous collector importance.

Tanzanite provides an even more obvious example of geographical restriction. The blue to violet gem variety of zoisite is associated with a remarkably limited area around the Merelani Hills of northern Tanzania. There is no equivalent network of deposits around the world continually replacing that source.

Larimar shows something similar in the Dominican Republic. The material occurs commercially within a very restricted area, but even within that supply there is a huge difference between ordinary material and the strongest blue, best-patterned examples.

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**QUALITY RARITY**

That leads into the kind of rarity I probably underestimated most when I started collecting: quality rarity.

A deposit might produce a considerable amount of one mineral while only a small proportion has the qualities collectors really want. Some pieces will have stronger colour, some better form, some less damage and others a more attractive relationship with their matrix.

The overall material may not be especially scarce.

The exceptional examples can be.

Aquamarine illustrates this very well. It is found in many parts of the world and is not an extraordinarily rare mineral, but that tells you little about how often you will encounter a strongly coloured natural crystal from a desirable locality with good termination, attractive proportions and minimal damage.

The same applies to fluorite.

A mine may produce large quantities of fluorite while only occasionally opening a cavity containing highly aesthetic crystals. Industrial production and specimen production are not the same thing, even when they happen in the same deposit.

Once an individual pocket is exhausted, another kind of scarcity begins. More fluorite may be found elsewhere in the mine, but there is no guarantee that it will reproduce the same colours, zoning or crystal form.

## SCARCITY &amp; DEMAND



This is one of the reasons mineral markets can change so quickly.

Material that seemed difficult to find can suddenly appear everywhere after a new discovery. Dealers buy it, photographs spread online and within months a locality that previously seemed obscure can become familiar.

A few years later the supply may slow again.

What changed in that period was not the rarity of the mineral species but the amount of material reaching the market.

Demand can move just as quickly.

Moldavite existed for around 15 million years before social media introduced it to an enormous new audience. Its geological origin did not become any more extraordinary during lockdown, but suddenly far more people wanted it. Prices moved, stories about its supposed effects became more visible and fake material became an even bigger part of the market.

That is one of the clearest examples of why rarity and value cannot be treated as the same thing.

A mineral may be genuinely rare and attract relatively little commercial interest. Another may be far more abundant while thousands of people compete for the best specimens.

Collectors are human beings, so geology is only part of the market.

Colour matters. Beauty matters. History matters. Jewellery demand can matter, as can fashion and the reputation of a particular locality.

## MARKETING

The word "rare" becomes even less useful when it moves into marketing.

Spend long enough browsing minerals online and you eventually reach a point where almost everything appears to be rare.

Ordinary material acquires dramatic trade names. Unusual colours are treated as though nobody has ever seen them before. The word can appear in a description without any explanation of what is actually supposed to be scarce.

I do not assume every questionable description is deliberately dishonest.

Mineral information often passes through several people before reaching the final seller. A name is repeated because that was what the supplier called it, and before long the description has appeared on enough websites to look authoritative.

Blue John shows the importance of being precise from another direction. Genuine Blue John is associated with a very particular part of Derbyshire and has a history tied closely to that locality. Calling any vaguely purple and yellow fluorite "Blue John" would make the name much less useful.

Seeing a description repeatedly does not necessarily make it accurate.

That has made me much more careful about what I mean when I describe a specimen as rare.

Sometimes the mineral species itself occurs in very few places. In other cases the interesting part is a highly restricted locality, an exhausted pocket, an unusual crystal habit or an exceptional combination of size, colour and condition.

It may also be that comparable examples simply do not appear on the market very often.

Those distinctions matter because they tell us what is actually unusual about the specimen.

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# RARE?

## VALUE



The same applies to value.

Rarity can contribute to price, particularly when the material is also desirable, well formed and difficult to replace. It cannot explain price on its own.

I have handled minerals that are vastly rarer than quartz and still found myself more excited by an exceptional Swiss crystal. I have also bought genuinely rare minerals that fascinated me intellectually but did very little for me aesthetically.

That does not make their rarity unimportant. It simply means that rarity is one part of the specimen rather than the whole argument.

My collecting changed quite a lot once I understood that.

I still enjoy finding material that is genuinely difficult to obtain, and I suspect I always will. Rare Minerals Earth would be a rather strange name otherwise.

What matters much more to me now is finding something unusual and good. I want to understand whether that rarity comes from the mineral itself, a particular locality, an unusual occurrence or simply the exceptional quality of the specimen in front of me.

When I first started collecting, I thought knowing that something was rare was enough to tell me it was special.

These days I would rather look at the specimen first.

*“These days I would rather look at the specimen first.”*