

Hawaii astronomer working on meteor tracking system

Posted: Feb 15, 2013 4:27 PM

Updated: Feb 15, 2013 8:04 PM

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HONOLULU (HawaiiNewsNow) - The meteor streaked across Russia's skyline and slammed into earth's atmosphere.

"When you're traveling as fast as this thing is traveling, something like 33,000 miles per hour, hitting the atmosphere is just as substantial as hitting a brick wall," Bishop Museum planetarium director Mike Shanahan said.

The shockwave damaged buildings, shattered windows and shook up the town of Chelyabinsk. It injured more than a thousand people. Most were hurt by shards of broken glass.

University of Hawaii astronomy professor John Tonry said it's difficult to estimate the size of the rock.

"We know how big the explosion was. We have the sense of how fast it was coming in because it left a sonic boom, and people could see it moving across the sky," he said.

He said significant meteor events happen once every five years. But smaller bits of space rock invade earth's space all the time.

Shanahan believes the Russia meteor was too small to track.

"That of course is the concern is that some of these things come in under the radar, literally, and cause damage like this," he said.

Tonry is working with NASA and other astronomers on a tracking system to spy out space debris. It's called the Atlas Project.

"I think if the system that I'm building were up and running, there's a good chance we would have been able to have seen it. When I say 'seen it,' probably just within about one day of impact. So one day's warning is all you'd get," he said.

Astronomers agree the meteor strike was not related to an asteroid that passed close to earth.

"But what are the odds that within 24 hours of this close pass, utterly unrelated, this space debris hits over Russia?" Shanahan said.

As for whether something like this could happen in Hawaii, Tonry said, "Absolutely."

"It's a complete crap shoot, and Hawaii is just in the cross hairs as much as anybody else," he said.

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