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Tourist allegedly stole ear from Easter Island statue

AP, SANTIAGO

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A Finnish tourist was detained after allegedly stealing a piece of volcanic rock from one of the massive Moai statues on Easter Island.

Marko Kulju, 26, faces seven years in prison and a fine of US\$19,100 if convicted of stealing pieces of the right earlobe from a Moai, one of numerous statues carved out of volcanic rock between 400 and 1,000 years ago to represent deceased ancestors.

A native Rapanui woman told authorities she witnessed the theft on Sunday at Anakena beach and saw Kulju fleeing from the scene with a piece of the statue in his hand. Police later identified him by the tattoos the woman saw on his body.

Kulju used his hands to tear off the earlobe, which fell to the ground and broke into pieces measuring 20cm to 30cm each, Easter Island Police Chief Cristian Gonzalez said in a telephone interview. Kulju ran away with at least one of the pieces from the 4m tall Moai, he said.

"Fortunately, this type of thing does not happen every day, but it does happen, and it is almost impossible to control because on Easter Island there are sites of great archeological value everywhere and the park guards cannot prevent all such incidents," Easter Island government official Liliana Castro said.

Authorities are inspecting the statue to see if it can be repaired, Castro said. Damaging Moais is punishable under a law protecting national monuments.

While some of the island's 400 Moais are more than 20m tall, most have an average height of 6m and weigh about 20 tonnes.

The statues gaze out on the south Pacific more than 3,700km west of Chile, which annexed Easter Island in the 19th century.

The Moais were nominated, but not chosen, as one of the new seven wonders of the world, selected by average citizens in a global poll conducted by a nonprofit organization last year. Among the monuments edging them out of the competition were India's Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China and Rome's Colosseum.

About 3,800 people live on the 180km² Easter Island.



A police handout photo shows a Moai at Anakena, Easter Island, after a 26-year-old Finnish tourist allegedly removed one of the figure's ears.

PHOTO: EPA