Managing light pollution

Once the dark skies have been mapped, an external lighting audit will be carried out to determine sources of light pollution.

The National Park Authority can then work with parishes, communities and astronomy groups to look at how we can manage lighting and improve the dark skies, in line with guidelines from the Institute of Lighting Professionals. For example, streetlights can be changed to modern LED lights to reduce light pollution.

Dr Mason explains: "It is vital that we conserve the dark skies of those places we still have within the boundaries of the National Park. The South Downs is an area of incredible natural beauty, and in my opinion, dark skies must be viewed as another of its most important attractions".

Regardless of whether the South Downs National Park gains IDSR accreditation, it will still be hugely important to protect the dark skies and the tranquillity of the National Park.

Find out more

Information on how the project is developing can be found at www.southdowns.gov.uk/darkskies. Here you can find out which parts of the National Park have been surveyed, see the team's comments on the results so far and find out more about you can help.

South Downs National Park

The South Downs National Park is Britain's newest National Park, rich in landscape, culture and wildlife. Discover ancient woodland and enjoy spectacular views as you explore the open downs and heathlands. Within these landscapes lie bustling market towns and peaceful rural villages, historic houses and the remains of ancient settlements.

Contact us

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South Downs National Park

Dark Skies

In the South Downs National Park

A project to protect the tranquillity of starlight in the South Downs

What are Dark Skies?

The South Downs National Park is a great place to experience the best free light show there is, with twinkling stars, whizzing shooting stars and bright planets scattered across the sky.

Less than 10% of the UK population can see the beauty of a natural night sky full of stars and the south east is the most light-polluted regions of the UK.

Our street and outdoor lighting affects the dark night skies, and the orange glow from our towns and cities is visible for miles around.

Dark Skies is the term given to areas that are relatively free from this pollution and this leaflet explains their importance to our wildlife and starry skies.

Why are they important?

Light pollution is an increasing problem across the country. It threatens ecologically sensitive habitats and reduces astronomical opportunities.

With nearly a third of vertebrates and 60% of invertebrates being nocturnal, several species depend on darkness for survival. High levels of light pollution cause them to become disoriented, resulting in decreased reproduction and reduced foraging for food.

Dr Mason MBE, from the South Downs Planetarium, says: "This is not just about stargazing, it is about preserving the night-time environment for the benefit of all the animals, birds and insects that thrive at night".

Even in the countryside, unnecessary, poorly aimed and overly bright floodlights and security lights can affect the day-night cycles, behaviour, feeding and mating patterns of bats, birds, moths, glow-worms and many other species.

How we can save the dark skies

One of the ways to protect the dark skies (and therefore the wildlife), is to apply for International Dark Skies Reserve (IDSR) status. There are only a handful of locations in the world that have been granted this status, so it's seen as something very special.

To see whether the South Downs has the potential to become a Dark Sky Reserve, we must first measure and map the quality of the sky. This project has already begun, and initial findings show that there are some impressive areas where you can see the Milky Way, the Andromeda galaxy and the Orion Nebula with the naked eye and binoculars.

Once this mapping is complete, we can draw an estimated dark sky core boundary, which shows the darkest area of the National Park. This is required for the application to the International Dark Sky Association, and it identifies where the critical areas – those at threat from increasing light pollution – are.

M27 Dumbell Nebula. Steve Futcher

M33 Triangulum Galaxy. Simon Downs

M42 Orion Nebula. Steve Futcher

NGC 7380. Wizard Nebula. Simon Downs

Saturn. Phil Reed and Steve Knight

M51 Whirlpool Galaxy