

Case Study

Buriton Parish: Preserving our Dark Night Skies

Background

The South Downs National Park (SDNP) became an International Dark Sky Reserve in May 2016. Given its location in the South of England, the skies are surprisingly and wonderfully dark.

The international status should ensure that light pollution remains under control, if not reduced, and the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) now uses its role as a planning authority to protect the dark skies above as well as the landscape on the ground.

However, the planning system can only influence new development so communities are also taking steps to enhance their dark skies by reducing the effects of existing lighting, with benefits for people and wildlife.

Buriton, in the east of Hampshire, is one community which has taken the issue very seriously with a number of initiatives and events producing impressive results.

The SDNPA has produced guidance in a '[Dark Skies Technical Advice Note](#)' (TAN), approved in May 2021, and an overview of basic lighting principles in "Towards a Dark Sky Standard".

The TAN sets out the Authority's approach to lighting and the protection and enhancement of dark skies. It provides everyone with information to produce appropriate schemes. "Towards a Dark Sky Standard" gives an overview of key considerations.

The Milky Way captured from the parish of Buriton



The project

Buriton parish lies in the core area of the Dark Sky Reserve, with some of the darkest skies in the National Park, but forms a narrow pinch-point – with more widespread darker areas to the west and to the east but with brighter areas to the north and south. The community, therefore, appreciates that any deterioration in the quality of night-time darkness in the parish could threaten the international status of the entire Reserve.

In order to retain and protect the wonderful 'sky full of stars' above the village – and to help people appreciate and enjoy the opportunities – the Parish Council started a Dark Skies initiative in 2012 and has subsequently facilitated a series of events, activities and actions. Star-gazing parties on the village recreation ground were an early part of the project with indoor alternatives provided when conditions were too cloudy. The parish church has also been used as a mini-planetarium with images projected onto the walls and ceiling and with local children demonstrating the expanse of the solar system by clutching appropriately sized pieces of fruit.

Opportunities to engage, educate and inform have been grasped at the annual village show with examples of good and bad light fittings and activities to involve families. A special leaflet was distributed to every household describing how fortunate residents are to be able to see so many stars, explaining why darkness is important to wildlife and providing tips, advice and sources of information.

A regularly updated Village Design Statement includes an emphasis on tranquillity and dark skies to help residents and developers – and the Parish Council has consulted widely and worked hard with the County Council to bring changes to the local street lighting strategy.

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“The community takes its dark skies designation very seriously, appreciating our star-studded nights as well as our wonderful landscapes and buildings.”

Doug Jones, Buriton Parish Council

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The outcome

The quality of Buriton’s dark skies has generally been retained over the last decade and the community is now home to one of only 12 designated Dark Sky Discovery Sites in the National Park. Contributory factors include:

- More and more people in the parish now ensure that any external lights now use lower wattage bulbs, only shine ‘where’ needed (downwards and shielded from neighbours) and only shine ‘when’ needed (using timers or proximity sensors)
- Replacement of external lighting on public buildings including the village hall
- Special changes to the County Council’s street-lighting strategy with extra dimming at all times, extended ‘night time’ hours (with increased dimming from 11pm to 5am) and, since 2019, all lights are now turned off completely between 1am and 4am.
- The community’s Village Design Statement and SDNPA Local Plan Policy SD8 have helped to influence development proposals prior to submission – as well as influencing decisions
- Low transmittance glass and electronically controlled blinds are now commonly included as Planning Conditions
- The District Council uses Local Plan Dark Skies Policies amongst reasons for refusal and cases have been upheld on Appeal.

Other benefits include:

- Increased Dark Skies Tourism opportunities for overnight stays at the Village Inn and farmhouse B&Bs (extending the traditional visitor season)
- Extra visitors to the Five Bells pub: before or after star-gazing activities
- Health and well-being for residents and visitors: increased calmness and tranquillity providing reflective opportunities

Benefits for wildlife (day-time and night-time creatures): helping with rest, energy, foraging, orientation, pollination and reproduction.

The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP)

2020–25 The Partnership Management Plan 2020-2025 brings together and coordinates the aspirations of many different partners who help contribute towards the purposes for which it was designated.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 1: The landscape character of the South Downs, its special qualities, natural beauty and local distinctiveness have been conserved and enhanced by avoiding or mitigating the negative impacts of development and cumulative change.

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/>

The future

With widespread unobstructed views overhead from Buriton’s village recreation ground, in one of the darkest locations in the South Downs International Dark Sky Reserve, there are commonly sweeping views of the starry skies.

Communities can encourage residents and businesses to protect and enhance their dark skies so that more people, and wildlife, can benefit from opportunities.

Communities can also work with the relevant highway authority to explore extended dimming of street lighting.

More details about the South Downs Dark Skies Reserve and the Buriton initiative are included in a BBC radio programme:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct1pqw>

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