



Dark Skies and Light Pollution – an FAS Position Statement

“The case for controlling light pollution has scientific, educational, environmental, aesthetic and economic dimensions. It’s a deprivation for us all never to see a dark night sky. It’s not just the astronomers who would miss it – just as it’s not just ornithologists who would miss songbirds if they disappeared from our gardens. Light pollution is a waste of energy too. The government should implement modest changes in the planning and regulatory system that could stem and indeed reverse the current trend. Such measures would certainly earn the gratitude of the next generation and would surely command broad support today.”

Lord Rees of Ludlow, Astronomer Royal

Foreword to *Ten Dark Sky policies for the government*, All Party Parliamentary Group for Dark Skies 2020

Three Key Recommendations

The FAS endorses the objectives and recommendations of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Dark Skies set out in their 2020 policy paper *Ten Dark Sky policies for the government*. We encourage all member societies to support the work of this group and the many international, national and local groups whose work underpins its recommendations.

The APPG for Dark Skies (appgdarks skies.co.uk) is co-chaired by Andrew Griffith MP and Lord Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal. The Ten Dark Sky policies for government document is essential reading. There is no existing legislation to protect dark skies, and government and lighting industry guidelines on light pollution are demonstrably ineffective. The presence of such a Group is encouraging and crucial to the prospects of bringing about the necessary legislative change. The FAS recommends that members write to their local MP, advocating support of the Group’s work and proposals.

The FAS views dark skies and light pollution as broad issues that affect and concern everyone, not just astronomers.

The specific interests of astronomers represent one strand in the fabric of reasons to value dark skies and oppose waste light at night. Astronomers and lovers of the natural world don’t need the value of dark skies explained to them but many people do. The myth that brightly lit nights keep us safe persists in the face of conclusive evidence to the contrary. The association of ‘light’ with ‘good’ and ‘dark’ with ‘evil’ endures, even though the evidence shows that both light and dark belong in our lives and that, while well-managed artificial light is useful, ill-managed light at night harms us, our fellow creatures and our world in serious ways.

The FAS advocates an evidence-based approach to these issues. Evidence now shows that the damage due to light pollution includes the following:

cultural and aesthetic loss on a truly unprecedented scale, destroying a legacy of meaning and beauty that had been ours from the earliest times;

harm to wildlife and biodiversity, including to creatures whose well-being directly affects ours;

harm to human well-being and association with specific mental and physical disorders;

waste of energy and public money;

contribution to climate change.

In the UK, unspoiled, naturally dark night skies are rare. Many places praised for the quality of their skies are affected by horizon glow and scattered or reflected light from nearby or distant towns and villages. Waste light recognises no community boundaries and travels to pollute the sky in remote places far from its source. This means that lighting providers and dwellers in towns and villages are as much custodians of our rural dark places as of their own neighbourhoods.

Nor can anyone escape the consequences of the wide-spread, systemic damage that light pollution causes. Like smokers in a crowded room, polluters themselves are as damaged by the fall-out from light pollution as those whose lives they pollute. Light pollution affects everyone and is everyone's responsibility.

Alongside support for national initiatives, the FAS recommends convening local groups in which organisations sharing an interest in protecting dark skies and opposing light pollution, but from different perspectives, come together to speak with one voice.

This model is inclusive and comprehensively truthful in a way that appeals based primarily on inconvenience to astronomers are not. It goes a step further than occasional collaboration, valuable though that can be. By bringing together many different interest groups to speak with one voice it sets out to attract and access wider support and to increase the prospects of bringing about change.

This is the model followed by the UK *Dark Skies Matter* initiative (darks skiesmatter.org.uk) that was started in Surrey by John Evans with the joint support of the Surrey Hills AONB, CPRE Surrey, Surrey Wildlife Trust and local RSPB and is now endorsed by a number of national bodies. This broadly-based initiative sets out to encompass the true range and extent of the issues and to be more effective than appeals focused on the concerns of any single interest group. It supports the interests of astronomers and has the added advantage of building mutually informative links with other groups whose interests overlap. Where no such arrangements yet exist, societies might like to consider appointing an officer to take a lead in approaching other local groups with a view to building similar joint initiatives. A nationwide network of such groups could be powerful in helping to drive the dark skies agenda in the interests of all.

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