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CALIFORNIA TODAY

A Bay Area Community Wants to Protect Its Dark Skies

West Marin is hoping to become a Dark Sky community.



By Soumya Karlamangla

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Point Reyes Station is hoping to become a Dark Sky community. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

When you look up at the night sky, what do you see?

For many of us, the answer is not much.

Instead of glittering constellations, we're often greeted by nothing more than a darkened haze overhead, as city lights obscure our nighttime views. Light pollution has become such a serious problem that 80 percent of people living in North America can't see the Milky Way, according to a 2016 study.

But there are, of course, less lit places on the planet where the stars still

gloriously sparkle. And one of California's starry spots wants to make sure it stays that way.

Point Reyes Station, Bolinas, Stinson Beach and a cluster of other small communities in western Marin County, north of San Francisco across the Golden Gate Bridge, are hoping to be designated as Dark Sky Places. That would mean that they were officially recognized for good night sky quality by DarkSky International, a nonprofit group that advocates protecting night skies from light pollution. The Point Reyes National Seashore nearby is seeking a similar distinction.

Light pollution can disrupt our circadian rhythms, dangerously confuse birds and insects, and disrupt the activities of nocturnal animals. And, perhaps most simply, it can deprive us of the wonder of gazing up at a mesmerizing night sky.

"I've watched the lighting get brighter and brighter and brighter, and there's no regulation," said Peggy Day, one of the leaders of the DarkSky West Marin initiative, who has lived in the Point Reyes area for half a century. "I have seven grandchildren. They all live in and around Point Reyes, and I think about what they're going to be seeing."

There are now 131 certified Dark Sky Places in the United States. A handful are in California, but they're all in the southern half of the state: Joshua Tree National Park, Death Valley National Park, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and the San Diego County towns of Julian and Borrego Springs.

To become Northern California's first recognized Dark Sky Place, the communities in western Marin must adopt light-limiting features — things like timers and motion sensors to turn lights off when they are not needed, and shields to prevent light from unnecessarily shining upward — and write standards for them into local regulations, Day told me. So far, the effort has been largely noncontroversial, she said: "This is a project with tremendous momentum: The more we gather, the more comes our way."

A study released this year, based on observations from around the world, found the number of visible stars to be decreasing by about 10 percent a year because of the increasing use of artificial light. At that rate, half of the stars that are

visible when a child is born will be obscured by light pollution when the child turns 18, said John Barentine, an astronomer and former director of public policy for the International Dark Sky Association.

Speaking on KQED this month, Barentine emphasized that we're only beginning to understand the full impact of light pollution, which has been shown to harm wildlife, including the pollinating insects we rely on for our food supply.

"I do think this is one of the most significant environmental problems of our time that almost nobody knows about," he said.



In vetoing a bill, Gov. Gavin Newsom urged caution about making legal standards “in prescriptive terms that single out one characteristic.” Jim Wilson/The New York Times

The rest of the news

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