



Reconnecting with the night

When night falls the stars come out and there is so much solace to be had in these dark, quiet hours.

Words Kyra Xavia. Photography Fraser Gunn

There are many reasons to enjoy the night sky such as its enveloping stillness, comfort and beauty, yet there's one reason in particular that should heighten appreciation more than any other.

The darkness is disappearing – and along with it, the stars and all the gifts they bestow upon humanity.

Our use of light – often poorly placed, unshielded, too much, too bright, and too white, is dissolving our once close relationship with the dark.

The night holds much magic – just ask any child at bedtime, any adult when camping, and any family during a power cut. When stories are told, matches struck, fires lit and candles glow, something else is ignited – the human spirit. In the hushed nocturnal realm of mystery and possibilities, our inner light gets to twinkle.

It's part of the human condition to seek belonging, meaning and connection, and the night sky offers this and much more; it is a galactic gateway to awe, wonder and woo. In fact, access to the night sky is so important to mankind (and at risk), in 2007, the United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) declared it an inalienable human right.

There is also nothing more effective at putting problems into perspective, knowing our place, expanding consciousness and uplifting the soul than experiencing the vast majesty of the cosmos – and it's apt we raise our heads from mundance matters here on Earth to see it. Those who have experienced a truly dark sky on a clear,

moonless night know and value its transcendent power.

The self-governing Isle of Sark, in the Channel Islands, is one such place; it's the world's only Dark Sky Island. Sark has a small population, no street lighting or cars, and the only form of transport is by bicycle, boat, tractor and foot. The community illuminates their island responsibly, and as a result, the heavens are breathtakingly beautiful at night. It's no coincidence that residents report a fondness of darkness,

feelings of security and safety, low levels of crime and high levels of happiness in their community, as documented in a study by ecopsychologist, Ada Blair. Her findings show dark night skies have a positive and sometimes transformative impact on wellbeing.

"Despite its ban on cars and public lighting, Sark is not a community living in the 'dark ages' but one happily existing without many of the trappings regarded as necessities for modern life. There are 500 or so people comfortable with darkness, committed to preserving their night sky and every day reaping the benefits of

living in a landscape/skyscape virtually free of light pollution," says Blair. "This mass of stars in the sky, it makes you feel a lot better... you look up and you look out... it just draws you out, you concentrate on something else."

For others, this 'missing sky factor' and disconnection with the night explains why astro tourism and photography is booming. (Light pollution is now so common, it's obscured the Milky Way and all but the brightest stars from over two thirds of the world's population.) >

White LEDs – not so brilliant

Although energy-efficient, white LED lights emit blue-green wavelengths of light which worsen light pollution. The impact of these LED streetlights around the globe has been recorded by the International Space Station and is currently being monitored due to concerns about their health and the environmental effects.

The Milky Way, Tekapo
Right here in Tekapo, New Zealand, you can take a stargazing tour of the Southern skies from Mt John Observatory at the Aoraki Mackenzie Dark Sky Reserve.

Hello darkness, my friend

Our biological rhythms which keep us healthy, vital and flourishing depend upon the dark just as much as they do upon light, so make a date with darkness and get intimate with it.

- Give yourself permission to enjoy the soft transition of twilight, and appreciate how your body becomes naturally infused with calm.
- Keep your evenings gently paced and softly lit.
- Use warm yellow lighting when possible and keep it dimmed. Favour firelight and candles.
- Turn your bedroom into a sleep sanctum, invest in blackout drapes and remove all electrical and digital devices.
- Install blue light filter apps on your digital devices and laptop.

Never was I more aware of this loss than when I lived in Shanghai. So, when I first heard about visionary plans back in 2004 to establish the first dark sky reserve in the southern hemisphere, I rejoiced. Ever since, I’ve wondered what a gold tier night sky looked like: the highest rating given by the International Dark Sky Association (IDA.)

Well, I recently found out when I spent three precious nights at Tekapo, in the Aoraki Mackenzie Dark Sky Reserve, right here in New Zealand, and it was an unforgettable experience.

I planned my trip around the new moon and, one night, joined 13 other excited tourists for a tour of Mt John Observatory. Once our minivan passed the security gate, we travelled up to Mt John in complete darkness, whispering in anticipation. The air was crisp and clear, the guides warm and welcoming – and with perfect “seeing” conditions, we were treated to an engaging and mesmerising journey through the southern skies.

The following night, I joined a group of students from the University of Canterbury and toured the working part of the Observatory, then I spent the rest of the evening with esteemed astrophotographer Fraser Gunn at nearby Lake Alexandrina. Under the darkest, starriest sky he showed me how he captures the glory of celestial bodies on camera and why he’s passionate about passing his knowledge on.

“When people take a night sky photo for the first time, wow, it’s like being a little kid again. To share that feeling with people, what a reward,” says Gunn.

It was wonderful beyond words to discover others like me, who share a love of the stars and want nothing more than to safeguard our connection to them.

Murray Graeme and Hide Ozawa, co-founders of Earth & Sky Ltd feel this way. It’s taken years of hard work since 2004, but along with the help of a supportive team they established the Aoraki Mackenzie Dark Sky Reserve with a protected area of 707km² and a total area of 4367km². In 2012, it attained IDA status.

The small township of Tekapo (population 400), located in the

reserve, now bustles with tourists all year round – its glorious night sky protected by lighting ordinances specifically established in 1981 to ensure quality astronomical viewing from Mt John Observatory.

“Our real heritage comes from the night sky and its attributes, both spiritual and educational, are cornerstones future generations will want to tuck themselves in amongst. The night sky touches people deeply, and many Asian tourists

come here because they believe seeing the stars is good for the soul,” Murray says.

The reasons Tekapo was chosen for the site of the observatory in 1963 are the same reasons today, which make it such a stellar astro tourism destination. Although Tekapo’s location, climate, isolation, low population and night sky-friendly street lighting (low-pressure sodium) are all conducive to stargazing, there are other places in New Zealand which have recognised the asset we have above us and are keen to protect it too.

The Dunedin City Council plans to become New Zealand’s first Night Sky City. It’s taken an innovative step, creating a Dark Skies Advisory Panel to consult on smart lighting technology and minimise light pollution. This will provide a sanctuary for the stars and improve the view of phenomena such as the Aurora Australis in the region. The benefits are many, and councillors are hoping this may encourage other cities to join the crusade.

“It’s exciting to be looking at lighting from a completely different perspective – to give us back the night sky,” says Dunedin City Council corporate policy manager Maria Ioannou.

Naseby, a small town in Central Otago, also hopes to become a recognised dark sky destination, with potential in the future to develop a starlight trail.

Just imagine; if we act now to protect the night sky, we could become the world’s first dark sky country, giving us a unique status of immeasurable worth for our economy, environment and culture, and an invaluable heritage for our children and all future generations. **g**



For more on the beautiful night sky
earthandskynz.com
darksky.org

Matariki
Matariki is the Māori name for the cluster of stars also known as the Pleiades. It rises in mid-winter. For many Māori, it heralds the start of a new year. Matariki literally means the ‘eyes of god’ or ‘little eyes’.