



Nighttime scenery worth preserving, group says

Tom Beal Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Saturday, March 6, 2010 12:00 am

Artificial light is invading our darkest places, and astronomers aren't the only people concerned about it.

Chad Moore heads the National Park Service Dark Sky Team, a group of scientists who measure light levels in our country's parks and monuments and educate people on how to keep the skies dark.

"Why should we preserve, protect and nourish the daytime scenery and not the night?" Moore asked.

"The scenery of the national parks is more than just a Kodak moment. It is the scenery of America's past. It captures many aspects that are important to preserve because they help define the soul and character of this country."

When you lie in your sleeping bag at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, you should see the Milky Way, he said, but at the rim you see the glow from Phoenix.

We need to turn off our porch lights when we leave home to go sleep under the stars, Moore said. We need a national ethic that promotes darker skies.

Artificial light affects the species that parks are supposed to protect, he said.

"Roughly half the wildlife on Earth is nocturnal. When you add light, you are disrupting or destroying their habitat," he said.

Moore said light confuses birds, changes the mating behavior of frogs and attracts moths away from night-blooming flowers.

"Your deserts are very vulnerable," he said. "You have a lot of nocturnal animals and not much tree cover." Lighting upsets the balance between predators and prey, he said.

There are still dark places in our parks, forests and wilderness, but they're becoming more rare, he said.

"Somebody's porch light follows you to just about every national park."

Border lighting is a special problem, Moore said. Safety concerns can outweigh other considerations, he said, but overlighting an area doesn't make it safer.

"In general, a bank of lighting on a border can disrupt wildlife as much as the fences could," said Moore, whose team hasn't evaluated lighting on the Arizona border.

Park Service rangers are partners with the Border Patrol in making the parks safe for staffers and visitors, he said - a point brought home dramatically in Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in 2002 when Park Service Ranger Kris Eggle was fatally shot by a drug smuggler.

"It is important to point out that the Park Service is a partner in border security and we have lost one of our own in that mission," Moore said. "But we also have a mission to protect these places for the American people."

Contact reporter Tom Beal at 573-4158 or tbeal@azstarnet.com