

Vanishing night skies

Like clean air, clean water, wildlife, and the sounds of nature, a clear, dark, night sky and, weather permitting, the view of more than 2,500 stars and the Milky Way should be a part of a visitor's experience in national parks now and in the future. Overnight visitation is permitted in 130 national parks. However, light pollution increasingly obscures clear views of night skies even in parks. Such pollution is often from excessive or misdirected outdoor lighting and from highways, homes, office buildings, and other developments that can be as far away from a park as 100 miles. Some concession facilities in national parks may also add glare to the night sky. Unless light pollution is remedied, views of dark night skies may disappear from national parks.

Concerned about the issue of vanishing night skies, the National Parks and Conservation Association conducted a survey of National Park Service managers to obtain more information about problems with light pollution in parks. The responses from 189 of 376 national park system units, assumed to be representative, are profoundly disturbing.

Most of the 94% of the parks that offer overnight visitation and consider dark night skies an important resource offer some type of night-sky interpretive program. Nearly two-thirds of the units that offer overnight visitation consider light pollution a problem, and nearly 70% of the parks in four of five U.S. regions report

light pollution. More than 35% of parks with such problems considered the problems to be moderate or very serious. The source of light pollution in 70% of such parks is from both specific and diffuse sources.

Actions to reduce light pollution by the National Park Service and by adjacent communities have been extremely limited. Few parks have reduced light pollution in all their areas. The National Park Service has done nothing in nearly 21% of the units that report problems. In addition, communities are not supporting the protection of night skies. Only 10% of the parks that offer overnight visitation have reported helpful ordinances in nearby communities.

Yet, parks that offer overnight visitation could increase public awareness about light pollution and reduce light pollution within their own boundaries. Solutions to the problems may not require simply shutting off all lights. For example, low-pressure sodium lamps can reduce glare, and cutoff shields can eliminate horizontal and upward projections. Changing lighting systems may be cost-effective. For example, park officials at Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico cut energy costs by 30% by changing the lighting system in the unit.

Additional impacts from light pollution in the parks and potential solutions to the problem are discussed in the report on the NPCA website at www.npca.org/readaboutit/nightskies.html.