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Be a Friend to the Night Sky

by Soll Sussman

Protecting the night sky is not just about the stars, as magnificent as the sight of them might be.

In Hays County, the fastest growing county in Texas and in the country for that matter, we're working to counteract the conventional view that more people and more buildings automatically means more light and more light pollution.

Hays County Friends of the Night Sky formed in 2018 to protect and restore our night skies, increase safety, reduce energy cost and waste, and enhance the health of the county's people, plants and animals.

We're not working alone, of course. Dripping Springs became the first International Dark-Sky Community in Texas in 2014. Wimberley Valley (Wimberley and Woodcreek) gained the certification in 2018, and Buda is working toward it now. Throughout the Hill Country, they are among more than two dozen municipalities to have adopted outdoor lighting ordinances, and our fellow *Friends of the Night Sky* organizations are active in at least seven other counties.

A major problem, however, is the absence of county authority or control in unincorporated areas of the county, where much of the sprawling residential, commercial and industrial development takes place. In some cases, but not nearly enough, developers agree to voluntarily adhere to dark sky guidelines.

Through education and outreach, we are trying to inform how light pollution affects everyone, and there are numerous ways to make a difference. We encourage people to install lighting only to the level of light needed to do the job and to select warm-colored lights and to use shielding and downward facing lights. Energy saving controls on outdoor lights are helpful, such as timers, dimmers and motion sensors.

The idea that bright lights are essential for safety is misguided. Glaring spotlights, for example, may provide shadows as hiding places and actually obscure the view of what may be around us. Similarly, too many believe that turning on a light and leaving it on all night comes at a relatively low cost. Not only is this practice of all-night lighting a significant drain on energy and water supplies, but there is also the impact on climate change and the increase to your monthly electric bill. The International Dark-Sky Association found that leaving one 100-watt bulb on each night for a year is the energy equivalent of burning a half-ton of coal.

Many animals and plants are nocturnal, and the absence of true darkness can impact reproductive cycles and pollination. One of the most visible campaigns recently is the *Lights Out Texas* program to protect the billions of birds migrating through Texas each spring and fall. Hays County Friends of the Night Sky joined with government, businesses and community organizations in a *Lights Out, Hays County!* campaign to magnify the statewide message locally.

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Every incorporated city in Hays County as well as the county government signed on to the campaign, asking everyone to turn off non-essential lights at night from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. during the spring migration period that lasts through June 15 this year.

“Using light responsibly matters every night for many reasons, but it is especially important during spring and fall bird migrations,” said Larry Calvert, Hays County Master Naturalist board member. The majority of migrating birds travel at night and, as a result, light pollution is one of the biggest threats they face. Artificial light at night can cause migrating birds to become disoriented, which can then lead to building collisions or interactions with other threats like outdoor cats. Millions of birds die each year as a result. Other species, from turtles to fireflies to bees to bobcats, are impacted by light pollution too.

Light pollution also disrupts human health by suppressing natural melatonin levels and affecting circadian rhythms. One of the most frequent questions received at outreach events is, “How can I get my neighbor’s light to stop shining into my bedroom?” We suggested sharing a pamphlet on outdoor lighting and safety.

Of course, cataloging the broad range of harm that light pollution causes by no means takes away from the importance and breathtaking beauty of the night sky. While 62% of the Hill Country has “excellent” night sky visibility - according to recent [State of the Hill Country Report](#) - even a short-time resident of Hays County may talk about how the clarity of the view of the stars has diminished in only a few years. Astronomy buffs often need to take their telescopes farther into the countryside instead of looking at the sky from their backyards as skyglow from light pollution advances.

The answer doesn’t have to be turning off all the lights if residents, businesses and industry learn how to use light responsibly. There are many good lighting recommendations at [darksky.org](#), the website of the International Dark-Sky Association, and its Texas chapter, [idatexas.org](#).

The economic impact from light pollution can be considerable. Astro tourism has become increasingly important in places like Dripping Springs and westward through the Hill Country. Some are renaming the Great North American Solar Eclipse of April 8, 2024, as the Great Texas Hill Country Eclipse as its best view path crosses much of our Hill Country.

Electric streetlights were first used in 1878, so we have gone from natural darkness to increasingly pervasive outdoor lighting in less than 150 years for residential, commercial and industrial development. It’s time to consider changing our night lighting habits and instead celebrating all the wonder and beauty and health that natural darkness provides.

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Attachments:

Photo: Starry skies over field of bluebonnets – Photo Credit: Rob Greebon
Graphic from State of the Hill Country Report: Night Sky Visibility Map (2015)
Find The State of the Hill Country Report at: [OurTxHillCountry.org](#)

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