

# Shedding a light on dark skies

**NOT! After all, this is International Dark Skies Week**

by **Bob Kennemer**

**HUERFANO** — Did you know that Huerfano County is part of an effort to create what would be the second largest dark sky reserve in the world?

For more than four years now, several southern Colorado counties and communities have been working with the International Dark Skies Association (IDA) to make the majority of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range an official dark sky reserve. The Sangre de Cristo Dark Sky Reserve (SDCDSR) would run from Salida and Chaffee County to the north and run all the way south to Huerfano County.

## WHAT IS A DARK SKY RESERVE?

A dark sky reserve is a designated area that has chosen to adopt and adhere to various controls on outdoor lighting as set down by the IDA. Because most of the proposed SDCDSR is located within the Pike San Isabel National Forest and other public lands, most of the region already meets dark sky standards. Several large ranches along the range have also agreed to follow the IDA guidelines. Current efforts include local government working with the IDA to adopt standards to keep outside lights shining down, rather than out and up.

The SDCDSR is being coordinated through an organization called San Luis Valley Great Outdoors (SLVGO) based in Alamosa. That organization coordinates SDCDSR monthly meetings and efforts for all of the local government and organizations that

comprise the SDCDSR. By working with the town of La Veta, Huerfano County, and even Cuchara Mountain Park, the IDA can assist land use planners to better understand the required regulations and policies to meet dark sky specifications. The City of Walsenburg has not yet decided if it will participate in this effort. One part of IDA certification is the support of a majority of the citizens within the IDA boundaries, so cities and towns play an important role in this.

## WHY DO WE NEED A DARK SKY RESERVE?

According to the IDA, any artificial light that is not needed is a pollutant that has serious and harmful consequences. Light pollution can: disrupt wildlife, impact human health, waste money and energy, contribute to climate change, and block our view of the universe. Light pollution impacts migrating birds and disrupts the circadian rhythms that we and animals need for better sleep and overall health.

Plus, light pollution is increasing at twice the rate of population growth, and 83% of the global population lives under a light-polluted sky. That means most people in the world cannot see the stars at night or the

view is greatly impaired. Being able to view the night sky is an integral part of many cultures' way of life including their spirituality.

Aside from the benefits to wildlife and human health mentioned above, dark skies can benefit local economies by what is known as 'Astrotourism'. Westcliffe and Silvercliff in Custer County, just north of Huerfano County, were the first two official dark sky communities in Colorado.

Those communities now boast a thriving business related to dark skies, as visitors flock to the area from all over the world to attend what are known as 'Star Parties'. Several B&Bs, hotels, rental properties, shops and restaurants enjoy a nice spike in business, all due to the attraction of dark skies.

Crestone is another recent dark sky town and the Great Sand Dunes National Park was one of the first dark sky national parks.

## DOES THIS MEAN I CAN'T HAVE OUTSIDE LIGHTING?

In a word, no. The issue is not outdoor lights, in general. Rather it has more to do with where the light shines, how bright the lights are, and

the kind of lights. It is a falsehood to think that one has to light up their property like a Colorado Springs car dealership to provide a secure home and yard. Consider this, when a home spot light shines outward, it not only can blind a burglar, it can also blind you, the homeowner. For example, when one is out hiking, you might put on a broad brimmed hat to not only prevent sunburn, but to also keep the sun from impairing your vision.

Better yet, try this the next time you are watching one of our spectacular Sangre de Cristo sunsets; as the sun is dropping closer to the ridge line horizon, simply hold your hand up to block the direct sunlight from your eyes. Notice how you can now see the entire scene event better? Yes, we do this all of the time; shield the sun from our eyes to see better.

Essentially, if you need to have lights on in your yard at night, aim them lower, not up into the sky, and put the equivalent of a cap on them to keep the light going down and around the ground instead of up. As a bonus, it'll actually be more efficient, since all the light you pay for will actually be illuminating your property and not the air particles above it.

To learn more or to get involved visit the IDA Dark Sky Week website at: <https://idsw.darksky.org/> or the primary IDA website at: <https://www.darksky.org/>

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