

Stargazing

A Driving Force in Ecotourism at Cherry Springs State Park

For most Americans, no longer is the night sky velvety black, bejeweled with twinkling stars, and spanned by the vast arch of the Milky Way. Rather, it usually presents itself as a bright, milky orange sky, awash in the glow of scattered sodium vapor lights from poorly designed light fixtures, virtually devoid of stars. Indeed, the likelihood is remote that anyone younger than a Baby Boomer has ever experienced the true majesty of a dark and star-spangled country sky—and it is entirely possible that many people have never seen anything in the night sky but the moon. It is the twin blights of sprawl and light pollution that have made dark, star-filled skies perhaps the most immediately endangered natural resource in North America today.

Because so few people presently live beneath pristine dark skies, most people's only access to them comes when they are on vacation far away from the city skyglow. For the average visitor to a dark-sky park, stargazing often isn't even on their personal radar. Many city dwellers are so stunned by what they have been missing that by the end of their visit to a dark-sky park, access to a dark sky may well be a major factor in deciding where they will take their next vacation.

There may be more than a quarter of a million active amateur astronomers—stargazers—in North America, and their number is steadily increasing. Most are between the ages of 35

and 65. Many are highly educated and financially secure. Many have been ecotourists for more than 20 years, and gaining access to dark skies is the primary reason that they travel. In their quest, these wanderers often travel to North America's most rural parks, and they may even embark on expeditions to such far-flung locations as South America, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa.

By the mid-1990s, a market had developed for dedicated "astronomy inns." This phenomenon coincided with the active sponsoring of stargazing programs by a handful of Western parks graced by dark night skies. Yet most people either remain unaware of such stargazing opportu-

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nities, or don't have access to them because of long distances or prohibitive travel costs.

The nearly universal desire of stargazers is to share the joy they find in the night sky with others, as indicated by the massive public education resources that astronomy clubs all over North America roll out every weekend. In the next few years, there will probably be a tidal wave of amateur astronomers retiring and actively seeking darker skies. Unlike many retirees today, one will be much more likely to find them teaching in a classroom or sharing their telescopes with others under dark country skies than to find them on the golf course. Amateur astronomers love to teach. In fact, they will represent the largest volunteer science education resource ever made available in North America. The National Public Observatory's Stars-In-The-Parks program is designed specifically to facilitate the maximum utilization of this amazing resource by getting educational programs going all over the country.

In 1992, during my own search for skies darker than those I had at home, I discovered a small, highly under-utilized park in rural north-central Pennsylvania called Cherry Springs State Park. This former Civilian Conservation Corps camp is located at a high elevation, and has superbly dark skies and a large open field that is perfect for astronomical observing. As I stargazed there, I realized that parks will soon be the last

places with dark skies in many regions, especially the eastern half of the country. I believe deeply that we need to protect these dark-sky enclaves. There is a market for more amateur astronomers to use rural parks such as Cherry Springs as educational sites, and also a market for park visitors to join amateur astronomers for fun and education.

By the spring of 1999, I had established a partnership with the National Public Observatory, an educational not-for-profit organization based in Radium Springs, New Mexico. My responsibility was to assist in the nationwide promotion of the Stars-In-The-Parks concept. It focused on developing a national plan for marrying the dark-sky and facility resources of parks with the volunteer educational expertise and equipment that amateur astronomers could supply, to produce a working program that could be used all over the North America.

But where to start? Cherry Springs popped into my mind immediately as the perfect prototype park in which to test the concept. All I had to do was figure out how to "sell" the idea to park management. After thinking about it for a while, I finally decided to "just ask the park manager—all he can do is say no." I was fortunate to find an enthusiastic and receptive audience in Cherry Springs State Park Manager Chip Harrison, who was more than ready to listen to a plan that would greatly

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increase park use. We have since forged a partnership that has created a unique stargazing program and ecotourism destination.

We have vastly increased park attendance (and, incidentally, also decreased vandalism and littering). On virtually every dark-of-moon weekend, scores of amateur astronomers observe from the park and share their telescopes and wisdom with anyone who comes to the park. Today, a major astronomy conference, the Black Forest Star Party, is also held at Cherry Springs. This weekend-long gathering of 300 to 400 amateur astronomers is part educational seminar, part trade show, part social gathering, and part observing outing.

The local tourist economy has also seen the benefit of this new park use with nearby stores, restaurants, motels, bed-and-breakfasts, and even other daytime attractions such as the Pennsylvania Lumber Museum all reaping significant dollars from the new influx of tourists. More important, the partnership has itself created still other partnerships that leverage our strengths even further.

The local electric utility, Tri-County Rural Electric Coop, has pitched in by installing full-cutoff shields on outdoor lights in the area for local businesses and individuals

to improve the already-excellent sky conditions. These full cut-off shields are purchased with profits from T-shirts sold to stargazers.

Last summer, we initiated regularly scheduled educational observing sessions. Beginning in the fall of 2001, through a new partnership with the local science teachers' association, we will begin providing astronomy education for local school classes. By next year, my wife and I will be living at Cherry Springs as volunteer astronomy educators who will serve not only that park, but also five other nearby state parks. During the seven-month observing season, we will be available on weekends to provide stargazing sessions. The focus of the program will be an ongoing series of lectures and educational activities designed specifically for novice stargazers. Over the next few years, building on the success at Cherry Springs, we hope to bring many parks into the Stars-In-The-Parks program.

The National Public Observatory's Stars-In-The-Parks is all about partnerships that produce tangible and positive benefits for parks, amateur astronomers, and visitors—a true win-win situation for everyone involved.

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