

Humanity deserves dark skies and starry nights

Joan Chittister | Apr. 15, 2014 From Where I Stand

Here's one for you. Who said it?

"Here in the United States we turn our rivers and streams into sewers and dumping-grounds, we pollute the air, we destroy forests, and exterminate fishes, birds and mammals -- not to speak of vulgarizing charming landscapes with hideous advertisements. But at last it looks as if our people were awakening."

No, this was not said by some enthusiastic young activist on a foray into the world of contemporary ecology. On the contrary, it was said by Teddy Roosevelt, the great conservation president, in 1901.

The subject clearly is not a new one; however, we have ignored it over the years.

Roosevelt, a genuine outdoorsman himself, was in the process of setting aside over 2 million acres of land to preserve the forests and natural value of this country in an era easily as rapacious as ours.

But at the same time, yes, it does "at last look as if our people were awakening." Over 100 years later, yes. But still good -- if it's not already too late.

At least we're at the point where ecology is being taught in our schools. Legislation has turned its attention to preserving the species of the planet. Commercial fishing quotas and methods are now on the radar of the world. Private citizens are devoting their lives to saving spawning places and water. And we're even beginning to understand that what we allow to happen to the habitat of animals will soon affect our own habitats.

And yet, our forests are still endangered. Our seas and rivers are still being overfished. Our groundwater is under attack from drilling methods designed to satisfy our insatiable lust for gas and oil.

Clearly, pollution is something we think we know a good deal about now. But then, out of the blue -- literally -- comes something many of us have never even thought about before. At least I never did. Until I got to Ireland.

Here in County Kerry, Ireland, where I have come to write for a while, a remote area of over 700 square kilometers on the Iveragh Peninsula has just been designated an International Dark Sky Reserve.

A what?

A Dark Sky Reserve, according to the [International Dark-Sky Association](#) [1] (IDA), is a populated area of both public and private facilities devoted to the control of light pollution. The Kerry Reserve is one of only eight designated Dark Sky Reserves in the world and [the first one in the Northern Hemisphere to receive "gold tier" status](#) [2].

And that is no small thing.

A Dark Sky Place, according to the IDA, an American-based organization founded in 1988, devotes itself to

researching the effects of artificial light pollution on human development. More particularly, it encourages the use of a kind of night lighting that reduces glare, stops light trespass, eliminates sky glow and studies the negative effect of night lighting on human health.

Each of them, the IDA claims, affects the quality of human life in ways most of us never dreamed.

Glare is the effect of bright light on human eyesight. When glare is eliminated, people see better, drive more safely, and reduce the degree of strain on the human eye.

When lighting trespass is eliminated, the illumination of someone else's property does not intrude on the rights of others to preserve the dark. The spotlight on the top of the garage across the street, for instance, does not shine into my bedroom -- or hotel room window -- and affect the quality of my sleep that night.

Sky glow, the effect of land-based lights on the visibility of a star-filled sky at night, dims the awareness of Earth's place in the cosmos for growing numbers of generations. Children who once were able to trace and name every constellation in the sky can now barely see the stars at all.

Finally, the human being functions on circadian rhythms, the sleep-wake cycle, which if disrupted can endanger human health and the development and welfare of nocturnal animals, as well.

When the natural rhythms of light and dark are maintained, however, [according to Dr. Stephen M. Pauley](#) [3], incidences of hypertension, obesity, attention deficit disorder, diabetes and even cancer in humans are decreased.

Like every other commitment to anti-pollution, it's a win-win situation for humans and for animals alike.

Clearly, the protection of night, the preservation of darkness, is an important, life-giving dimension of human existence, one that, the IDA claims, must be preserved if life itself is to be preserved at its healthiest best.

But most of all, perhaps, darkness returns humanity to humans. It restores the sense of beauty that nourishes the human soul. It encourages the study of astronomy, an area common to the earliest civilizations on Earth. In Ireland, for instance, the effects of astronomy in human life can be documented at Newgrange as early as 6,000 years ago, a milestone older than the pyramids of Egypt and Stonehenge in Britain. And it is perhaps never more important than now in an age of space exploration and the penetration of the farthest reaches of the universe.

Here in the Kerry Dark-Sky Reserve, you can see the stars with the naked eye just an arm's reach above your head. The night is as beautiful as the day, and the preservation of the darkness of the night is as rational an endeavor as the work we do at high noon.

But light pollution is its enemy. Our enemy. In fact, pollution, all human desecration of the planet, is our communal suicidal disease.

It seems we ought to be taking Teddy Roosevelt more seriously again. We can't ignore him for another 100 years. We need to remember that he said, "It is also vandalism wantonly to destroy or to permit the destruction of what is beautiful in nature, whether it be a cliff, a forest, or a species of mammal or bird."

It looks like we have gone just about as far as we can go.

From where I stand, it looks like we can't go on insisting how rational we are anymore. As long as we go on driving ourselves like lemmings into the sea of pollutions everywhere, we can't possibly be fully human.

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[1] <http://www.darksky.org/>

[2] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/travelnews/10607447/Ireland-gets-first-Dark-Sky-Reserve.html>

[3] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15325001>

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