

Celebrating the Darkness; Star Park

Written by Steve Frank

Wednesday, 26 February 2014 07:08

There's a new designation for an old site in Yancey County, as the Blue Ridge Observatory and Star Park has been established, situated six miles west of Spruce Pine. In honor of notable local efforts to preserve the natural nighttime landscape of western North Carolina, the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) announced today it has designated the first International Dark Sky Park in the southeastern United States. In recognizing the Blue Ridge Observatory and Star Park, IDA is pleased to acknowledge the work of Mayland Community College (MCC) in preserving a threatened dark-sky location while advancing its educational mission and vision of bringing the experience of primeval night to locals and visitors alike. The six-acre site, surrounded by rugged mountain terrain and the Pisgah National Forest, is owned by Yancey County and is managed by Mayland Community College. The site is co-located with the EnergyXchange, a project in which methane waste gas emitted by an old landfill heats horticultural greenhouses and artists' studios. Jon Wilmesherr, MCC Director of Learning Resources Center and Distance Education, who led the effort to secure the IDA award, is optimistic that the Star Park will serve as a model for land management by other colleges and universities.

"The lights fit all the optimum specifications for brightness, color temperature, and low wattage," said Wilmesherr. "Each lamp only uses 6 watts of electricity. We are now able to say this is the first all LED International Dark Sky Park in the world."

The Blue Ridge Astronomy Group (BRAG), a local amateur astronomy society, was instrumental in supporting MCC's application to the Dark Sky Places Program.

According to Bob Hampton, BRAG President, "Our Star Park will begin life as an isolated oasis of darkness mostly surrounded by a desert of light pollution, but our efforts will help that oasis to grow and expand – to push back against the sky glow. We have the incredible opportunity to be an example to others who might go home and take another look at the lighting and light pollution where they live, and realize that it doesn't need to be that way."

Community members also participated in the IDS application process. Bob Hampton, President and Founder of the Blue Ridge Astronomy Group and members supplied all the technical dark sky and star data that was required. Professional photographer Todd Bush captured astrophotography that shows the beauty of the night sky over the EnergyXchange. Wilmesherr retrofitted all the existing outdoor lighting at the park with new state-of-the-art Cree LED light bulbs. Cree is a North Carolina company with headquarters in Durham.

This designation was gained from a collaboration of educational and other outreach events organized by Mayland Community College, the Yancey County Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Commission, and The Blue Ridge Astronomy Group (BRAG). These efforts have resulted in Star Parties in a variety of locations since 2010. The Star Parties have been held on Mount Mitchell, Stars on the Square in Burnsville, NC, and at the EnergyXchange, the future site of the observatory.

New Life for an Old Site

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The EnergyXchange is among the pioneers of waste gas utilization on small, rural landfills, and is one of the nation's model energy recovery projects. It captures an amount of carbon in the form of methane gas equivalent to planting 14,000 acres (5,666 hectares) of trees or taking 21,000 cars off North Carolina roads each year according to Environmental Protection Agency estimates. Its presence has transformed the disused landfill, built atop a former mica mine, into a local center of activity for artists and agriculturalists alike. The latest rebirth of the site focuses on a different natural resource: its dark night skies.

Identifying the Star Park for potential IDA recognition began soon after MCC assumed management of the site in 2013. MCC, ranked among the top community colleges in the United States, plans to situate an observatory on the property featuring a state-of-the-art 34-inch (0.87-meter) telescope it will dedicate to educational and public outreach activities. The Samuel L. Phillips Family Foundation, a local nonprofit organization, provided funding for fabrication of the telescope's main mirror.

Dr. John Boyd, President of MCC, anticipates significant benefits to the community from locating the telescope under the dark skies at Blue Ridge Star Park.

"This entirely public observatory will offer evening and late night viewing through the largest public telescope in the southeast," Boyd said. "Our observing programs will provide an interesting, affordable, and educational family outing for the people of western North Carolina and the region."

MCC will partner with BRAG to offer dedicated on-site programming for quarterly dark sky events, as well as to implement a long-term plan to monitor the quality of the night sky over the Star Park for years to come.

About the IDA Dark Sky Places Program

IDA established the International Dark Sky Places conservation program in 2001 to recognize excellent stewardship of the night sky. Designations are based on stringent outdoor lighting standards and innovative community outreach. Since the program began, six Communities, 15 parks and eight reserves have received International Dark Sky designations. For more information about the International Dark Sky Places Program, visit <http://darksky.org/night-sky-conservation/dark-sky-places>.

About IDA

The International Dark Sky Association, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, advocates for the protection of the nighttime environment and dark night skies by educating policymakers and the public on the subject of night sky conservation and by promoting environmentally responsible outdoor lighting. More information about IDA and its mission may be found at <http://www.darksky.org>.