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California Today: The Push to Reclaim Starry Skies

By MIKE McPHATE OCT. 20, 2017



U.S. | California Today: The Push to Reclaim Starry Skies



Sculptures at Galleta Meadows Estates in Borrego Springs, a couple hour drive from San Diego. The community is recognized as an International Dark Sky Community. Kevin Key

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Good morning.

Astronomers have preached the virtues of dark skies for years.

Modern cities, they say, use way more artificial light in the evenings than necessary, much of it emanating into the sky where it does no good.

So-called light pollution erases our view of stars and, to a degree, the wonder they bring at our place in the cosmos.

It's estimated that a third of the world's population can't see the Milky Way.

So how bad is the light pollution in California?

"It's pretty bad," said Sriram Murali, a Bay Area photographer who is making a film about astronomy and light pollution. "It's not as bad as the East Coast, but definitely not as good as it is in the Midwest and Southwest."

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By the end of this year, San Francisco is expected to finish converting roughly 18,500 of its sodium high-pressure streetlights to dark sky-compliant LED bulbs.

People can expect to see a noticeable difference, including more visible stars in the night sky, said Tyler Gamble, a spokesman with the city's public utilities commission.

Los Angeles has also embraced LEDs in its streetlights, though the city chose a bulb with a bluish cast that critics say has only worsened the light pollution.

Dark sky groups recommend "warmer" LED bulbs with an amber glow. They also push the use of dimmers, motion sensors and timers wherever they make sense.

Softer lighting has been promoted in part on health grounds.

Research has shown that high-intensity lights at night actually do harm by suppressing hormones that help people fall asleep.

Mr. Murali, the photographer, said too many city dwellers seem to be unaware of what they miss in the absence of a truly starry sky. "We are always lost in our busy lives," he said.

As a reminder, one might consider a trip to a place like Death Valley National Park.

The desert valley has some of the best stargazing in the United States, said Gavin Heffernan, a co-creator of Skyglow, a video series and book that spreads awareness about light pollution.

"It's really incredible," he said. "You really feel as if you're just walking on Mars."