

Saving the Night Sky: Less Talk More Action

Keynote Address to the Ecology of the Night International Symposium

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Since I knew I'd find myself standing here today before a slew of technical experts and professionals, I thought it best to declare myself right from the start:

I'm here for strictly emotional reasons. I love the dark night sky, it has been a big part of my upbringing, and therefore it's a big part of who I am.

As a kid, I was raised in northwestern Ontario on a hydro camp north of Kenora, and I used to deliver the old Winnipeg Tribune to a trailer camp, dark and early, under cold, clear winter skies. The aurora borealis, the stars, the planets – everything above, never looked so super-natural, especially to a young boy completely on his own, with only the heavens for company.

While we lived in the North, our family ate a lot of wild food, especially fish, ducks, geese, moose and venison. So I used to go hunting with my father. This also meant getting up well before sunrise, for autumn hunts that were presided over by that great celestial hunter himself, Orion, followed by his trusty dog Sirius. Dad and I always figured that Sirius had to be either a good blue-tick hound or a Labrador retriever.

Later in life, I worked my way through university as a professional guide, canoeing the Arctic watershed of northern Ontario. I made a point of occasionally traveling over big water while it was calm by night, checking our directions and maps using the stars, and sleeping during the day. I tricked my clients into this, by telling them, "The Aboriginal people always used to do it."

For over 30 years now, I've had a modest, remote cabin up on the Shield northwest of Kingston. There I happen to share the same crater of darkness at night with Terence Dickinson. So, Terry, while you are expertly scanning our sky, over there cross-country in Camden East, I'm in Central Frontenac shuffling star charts and fumbling my own way through the heavens with my manual eight inch Schmidt Cassegrain – lovingly towed in on a toboggan in winter. My "observatory" is simply God's canopy itself, and how glorious it is! Incidentally, my 300 acres there are now covered by a 999 year conservation agreement with the Nature Conservancy, which prohibits any exterior lighting whatsoever for the next 10 centuries, in order to protect the night sky. So if something obnoxious appears to your east, Terry, it's not me!

Finally, Sherry and I live in the country northwest of Toronto. In searching for our home, we came to realize that really we were looking for just two things: a bit of quiet, and a

dark sky at night – both hard to come by within striking distance of the big city. Now I’ve mowed by own version of crop circles in patches of old field for my telescope. And jogging our gravel roads in the early morning gives me a daily glimpse of the stars and planets. You all should have seen the huge harvest moon on the horizon at 5:30 a.m. two weeks ago, smack dab ahead in the middle of the road I was running!

So there it is...I’m hooked. I am totally and emotionally embedded in the stars. For me, the night sky speaks to nothing less than where we all came from – our home galaxy, our sun, our planet and therefore ourselves. The night sky is both wonderful to witness, and fundamentally formative of all life on earth. Too bad two-thirds of humanity can’t even see it, let alone reconnect to their beginnings.

I also see the challenge of taking back the night as a logical extension of what I have done professionally now for 34 years, namely nature conservation. No surprise, then, that this symposium will be exploring how indispensable photoperiod is to the functioning of all things natural. For example, factors such as warming temperatures and thawing lakes may temper the tide of plant budbreak and dormancy or bird migration, but they are all ultimately set in motion and driven by photoperiod. It certainly stands to reason that since the Earth is tipped on its axis, orbits the sun, and also rotates, then all living things on the planet will have adapted to these astronomical facts that account for the seasons, and for day and night.

And when you really think about it, your task and mine – dark sky advocates and nature conservationists alike – can be sorted under the same broad strategy or mantra: “Protect, manage, and restore.”

Nature conservationists are in the business of protecting habitats that are still in a natural state; managing human activities so that their impact on nature is minimized; and attempting to restore or take back for nature areas that have been degraded or lost.

Sound familiar? It should. Because the task of dark sky advocates is to protect the dark sky where it still exists; to manage human activities with attendant light pollution so that impacts on the dark sky are minimized; and to restore or take back the night where it has become degraded or lost.

In both cases, whether we’re conserving nature broadly or dark skies specifically, note that the stakes are extremely high. Because we’re talking looming extinction here. Also note that the job gets more expensive and difficult as you move through the strategic gradient which I’ve described. For example, once you’ve lost the option to proactively protect nature or the dark sky, then the challenge is to manage human impacts properly. And if you have failed to protect or to manage properly, then you are faced with restoring something that is in real trouble, if indeed that is even possible. Realistically, will we ever have either nature or a dark sky in downtown Toronto?

The lesson, of course, is to take preventative action early in the game while you still can – a principle I call “conservation first.” It’s a sequencing argument really, recognizing

that the conservation of nature or dark skies, must be a pre-condition or a requirement before other human activities take place, especially large-scale development which has the biggest impact on both nature and darkness. Otherwise, we're continually playing catch-up, as conservation is stuck with the leavings after an industrial hurricane has ravaged the landscape.

So, when it comes to both content and strategy, I think we're natural allies. And natural allies can come together and learn things from each other, if for no other reason than to avoid making the same mistakes. In this regard, based on my experience on the nature conservation side of our shared agenda, and having attended enough conferences to paper the walls of an entire house with my conference name badges, may I respectfully offer you a little gratuitous advice?

Please don't study this problem to death.

To be sure, we need to publish papers, exchange information and make sure we know what we're talking about. But let's face it. All that studying only sets the stage for what really counts, namely doing something about the problems which all our studying has identified. Winston Churchill said, "When all is said and done, more is said than done."

And frankly, talk is cheap. It's not really that difficult to be a perpetual studier or talker, to be always setting the stage for action, or worse, whining from the margins about the fact that others aren't doing something. I gave up on that about 34 years ago.

I decided it's much more rewarding, not to mention responsible and fun, to actually engage our economic and political system, to persuade decision-makers to take specific actions, or better yet, to take such actions yourself.

Again speaking from experience, usually these conferences and symposia adhere to a pretty predictable pattern, don't they?

- First there's the prototypical "keynote speaker," That's me, holding forth up here right now. Next comes Henry, Tom and Terry – good luck, you guys.
- Then there's the proverbial "workshops," where information is shared, and "issues are identified."
- Next, there's "rapporteurs" reporting back to the "plenary." Am I right?
- Then, significantly somewhere towards the end, there's usually some kind of "call to action." It seems like maybe John Riley's got that job this week. Good luck, John.
- Then, months later, everyone who attended relives this momentary pulse of energy in the nearly- forgotten "conference proceedings," which prove useful to future generations of grad students, if no one else.

But I ask you: **Will the dark sky be any better off as a result of all this?** Or will we just disband, more convinced than ever that there's a big problem out there? Not good enough.

So, I'm here to turn this meeting on its head. I'm making the call to action up front. Now, not later. Sorry John, but conservation can't wait, and neither can the dark sky.

Specifically, I urge each one of you to do three things at the end of your respective presentations, even if it means revising those precious notes, those overheads and those fabulous powerpoints at the eleventh hour.

First, please identify as clearly and specifically as you can, what needs to be done to address the concerns or problems you have raised.

Second, identify specifically who needs to take these steps. Name names, or at least specific agencies.

Third, tell us what you personally are going to do.

If every one of you concludes your presentation in this way, you will give the conference organizers a helpful, practical shopping list from which to assemble an action plan for protecting dark skies. And that's what this meeting should produce.

Now, I will conclude by following my own advice.

Obviously, the slice of the dark skies problem, which my organization, World Wildlife Fund, can take on, relates to nature conservation. And the specific slice of nature conservation that we can take on is identifying and reserving a system of large protected areas on land and water, representing all the 500+ natural regions of Canada. WWF has a track record of considerable success in this regard, especially through our ten-year Endangered Spaces campaign in the 90s, when we helped establish over 1000 new parks, nature reserves and wilderness areas, effectively doubling the amount of protected area in Canada. Right now, our sights are set first, on new marine protected areas because Canada has the longest coast of any country in the world, and second, on the boreal forest because it covers some 500 million hectares which is over half the area of our country. The boreal forest also accounts for most of the circumpolar dark sky you see in the breathtaking photo from NASA on the back of your conference brochure.

The people responsible for establishing protected areas are: First Nations, resource industries such as forestry, mining, oil, gas, agriculture and commercial fishing, along with conservation groups, and of course governments at all levels. Trust me, we know exactly who they are.

And, what am I, Monte Hummel, prepared to do? Well, I'll make sure that one of the principle criteria for identifying protected areas is what contribution that area can make to protecting the dark sky. Perhaps more important, I'll make sure when it comes to managing that area, that maintaining dark skies is a value which is respected, promoted and achieved. For example, Peter Goering has already obtained the following commitment in the management plans for 55 Nature Reserves in Ontario:..“the Ministry

of Natural Resources will not allow unnecessary, undirected light pollution. This commitment recognizes the wilderness values provided by a pristine night sky.”

So that’s where I believe I, personally, can make a difference for our shared cause. And if WWF is successful, then a hundred years from now there will still be a respectable pool of darkness in the northern hemisphere when that same photograph on your brochure is taken from space.

Finally, a short story...

In 1999, on a warm September Saturday morning in Muskoka, a couple of dozen of us gathered at the Torrence Barrens to announce the first Dark Sky Reserve for Canada.

Peter Goering was there, and for my money, did more than any other single person to make sure this happened. Thank you, Peter.

There were also a few municipal officials, devoted naturalists, and other kindred spirits. The local member of the provincial legislature was hoped for, but didn’t turn up – Ernie Eves. I remember that I brought and set up my telescope, more as a prop for photographs really, because by mid-day after the speeches, it started to rain. So we all took off by early afternoon. That seminal event, as far as I can tell, garnered some local press, but otherwise went largely unnoticed.

Well, Peter, since then I’ve often thought what a brave bunch we really were! We were nothing less than a small cluster of humanity paying homage to our origins. Even more important, we were pioneers taking a landmark (or skymark) initial step. We actually did something to protect the night. We established the first Dark Sky Reserve in a country where there still can and should be many, many more.

I promise you all, here, today – there will be many, many more.