

DID YOU KNOW?



The reason you cannot see any trace of the Milky Way or so view many stars from practically any U.S. city is something called light pollution. With increased populations and burgeoning cities, the awesome opportunities to really see what is in our night skies are rapidly disappearing. Beginning in the 1950s we carpet-bombed our cities and roadways with tens of millions of those cobra-head streetlights. Dazzling displays, usually reserved for the likes of Las Vegas or Times Square, are now found at every restaurant, car lot and hotel.

Research has found most light (photons) travels a straight line up and out to space. It is that portion that exits the light source a few degrees above and below horizontal that cause all the problems. Those photons travel the greatest distance through the atmosphere and, as a result, illuminate all the water vapor and particulate matter they contact creating the bane of astronomers called *skyglow* or light pollution.

A mass migration of professional and amateur astronomers is underway to pockets of dark skies in the American southwest. Numerous astronomy-specific residential developments exist with their remote dark skies and strict lighting covenants planned to accommodate them. The country of Chile has passed the most forward-thinking and stringent outdoor lighting legislation on the planet. That country is currently experiencing a cultural, economic and scientific renaissance with all the new big observatories operating or being built there. They aim to protect their night skies.

So you ask, “What can I do?” You’ve already taken the first step by reading this article and becoming aware of the problem. Congratulations! The second step is easy also; turn off all the unnecessary outdoor lighting you can. Lastly, if you would like to become active in reversing the damage done, go check out the homepage of the International Dark-Sky Association www.darksky.org. In all of our efforts to save the whales, rain forests and everything else, anyone touched by the beauty and grandeur of the night sky, like this author, will know this is just as important.