

From the Field: Astrotourism, Awe, and Access

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Last week, I had the privilege of speaking at the Utah Tourism and Business Conference in Kanab, where I joined tourism leaders, business owners, community partners, and dark-sky advocates exploring the future of astrotourism in our region. My central message was simple: the best night-sky experiences are not only about astronomy or tourism, but they are also about awe, belonging, reflection, and keeping the stars open to everyone.



Across the Colorado Plateau regions, astrotourism continues to grow as communities recognize the value of their dark night skies. These skies support local economies, invite visitors into meaningful experiences, and remind residents of the beauty already present in their own backyards. But as this work grows, we also have a responsibility to ensure that night-sky experiences do not become exclusive or out of reach. The stars should never feel like a luxury product. They are a shared natural and cultural resource.

When we design astrotourism around awe, we create experiences that are deeper than sightseeing. We invite people to slow down, step outside, listen to the night, notice their place in the larger world, and reconnect with one another. A truly meaningful night-sky experience does not require expensive equipment or specialized knowledge. Sometimes it begins with a quiet place, a clear view, a thoughtful guide, and the simple invitation to look up. That sense of wonder may be one of the most powerful gifts dark skies have to offer.

Transformation Does Not Happen by Accident

Transformational design includes:



Pacing



Silence



Storytelling



Interpretation



Reflection



Shared
Experience

As our region continues to lead in dark-sky protection and astrotourism, I hope we keep asking important questions: Who has access to these experiences? How do we support local communities while protecting the night? How do we create programs that welcome families, youth, rural residents, visitors, and those who may never have thought of the night sky as something meant for them? If we can hold these questions well, astrotourism can become more than an economic opportunity. It can become a pathway toward connection, wellness, stewardship, and shared awe under one sky.

A Word of Caution

Astrotourism should not become:



Elitist



Extractive



Over-Programmed



Disconnected from
Local Communities



Extension
UtahStateUniversity

