

GUEST SPOTLIGHT



DARK SKIES PAONIA

AARON WATSON

Director of Dark Skies Paonia

“Most people who live in and around Paonia are interested in preserving the rural character and quality of life that have existed for generations. City light pollution does not fit into the description of what they want their home to become.” - Aaron Watson

Dark Skies Paonia

Dark Skies Paonia is a 501c3 non-profit organization working towards the goal of International Dark Sky Community Certification for the Town of Paonia, Colorado. Dark Skies Paonia was formed by a group of community members who enjoy the night sky but are frustrated with unshielded outdoor lighting shining into their homes at night. The group's mission of community-wide dark-sky friendly lighting is gaining momentum through a variety of proactive measures.

Public Outreach

Since its start in spring of 2019, Dark Skies Paonia has hosted and attended multiple community events providing dark-sky-related public outreach and educational materials. The group has been interviewed by two local newspapers - [The North Fork Merchant Herald](#) and the [Delta County Independent](#). Dark Skies Paonia has also been aired on two radio broadcasts, [KDNK in Carbondale](#) and [KVNF in Paonia](#). In the cinema, they recently screened the film [“Saving the Dark”](#) to a packed house at the Paradise Theatre of Paonia which received a lot of positive support.

A Regional Effort

Paonia is a small municipality within a big rural county. Region-wide support for dark skies is important in order to keep the skies surrounding the small town dark at night. Dark Skies Paonia has been working to build awareness on the regional level by talking with the local energy company, Delta Montrose Electric Association (DMEA); in order to get IDA compliant, fully-shielded, less than 3000 Kelvin, streetlights installed in Paonia and the greater region.

Delta County is facing an influx of outside influences including Oil and Gas development and Agricultural Hemp production. These industries can have big impacts on surrounding neighborhoods and quality of life if pollution isn't managed well - including light pollution. For this reason it is a crucial time for night-sky conservation in the region. Dark Skies Paonia is advocating for county-wide lighting regulations that would prevent people and industries from casting light onto adjacent land and diluting the night sky.



Starshine: Dark Skies Paonia Promotes Health and Aesthetic Benefits of Less Night-time Artificial Lighting.

By Cheryl Hardy

The private reason Aaron Watson is hooked on supporting the Dark Skies Paonia organization is that he is an avid amateur astronomer. This is the first year that astronomers have been involved with the movement. The global reason, however, is that this group works to prevent light pollution.

According to Wikipedia, light pollution is known to affect the circadian rhythms of humans as well as wildlife. Artificial light during nighttime hours has been linked to human cancer and psychological disorders as well as obesity and cardiovascular issues. Studies that have only begun to emerge the last five or ten years show that wildlife behaviors such as food gathering, feeding habits, mating and reproduction behaviors as well as migration and social behaviors are all affected.

Dark Skies Paonia is a non-profit organization with ties to the International Dark Skies group. The local non-profit only became official about two months ago according to Aaron. He said they have just begun to compile data that can be presented to the Paonia town council as part of a request for a lighting ordinance and a zoning code related to limiting/shielding public lighting. The thought is that light reduction would save the town money over time. The estimate by Dark Skies is that the investment would pay back with energy savings for the town in



two to three years.

Working with DMEA, the town has already converted from old sodium lighting to energy-saving LED light bulbs. However, explained Aaron, the LED bulbs are even brighter than the old style of lighting, even if they use half the energy. His organization is campaigning for town lighting to become shielded.

With proper shields in place, light would be directed down, not up into the skies.

"We are working on producing a lighting assessment like a spreadsheet of every public light in town. The estimated time for completion of the spreadsheet is about six months. We have begun making an inventory. The action involves locating a light, taking a picture and marking the location. DMEA owns the lights so we will ask them for details. They are willing to help. They would do the conversion work.

"We also need at least 100 signatures showing public support. We are going to be at fairs and showing a movie about the benefits of dark skies," he said.

There are a few negatives on the idea, Aaron explained. Some do not want tourism to grow, for example. Others feel there are safety concerns when walking at night. Some residents just don't want to be told what to do, such as putting on timers.

Aaron said his estimate of 300 to 500 lights includes town properties plus the parks and schools. His estimate does not include privately owned properties.

"When we moved to the area three years ago, I was amazed at how dark the sky is already. The biggest light

pollution is in the area of the mines but the mesas and places like Volunteer Park are already pretty dark. The Dark Skies designation will draw tourists, improve health and decrease energy costs," Aaron said.

The group will attend the Rural Philanthropy Days in Paonia during the week of June 12 where they hope to get help with their organizational efforts.

The group can be contacted through their Facebook page "Dark Skies Paonia" and Aaron can be messaged on Facebook as well.

Editor's Note: Cheryl, our Paonia energy transition/environmental writer will be taking the summer and fall off to concentrate on health issues. The Herald would invite writers, or would-be writer/interns to consider submitting articles about the Paonia area related to local-local energy transition, energy efficient building and/or lifestyles, sustainable farming and energy education. Send sample writing or questions to Tom at Elazarus.wills@gmail.com or call 872-2664.

Western Slope Colorado Rural Philanthropy Days Conference Comes to Hotchkiss and Paonia

The Western Slope Rural Philanthropy Days (WS RPD) conference, scheduled for June 12 to 14, 2019, will be held in the North Fork Valley of Delta County. The sold-out conference will host over 325 Western Slope nonprofit professionals and Front Range funders who will participate in educational workshops and networking events. The theme of this year's RPD is "Building Community and Blazing Trails."

Rural Philanthropy Days (RPD) is a statewide program that provides nonprofit leaders the resources they need to lead effective and sustainable organizations. RPD conferences convene nonprofits, funders and local governments to share ideas and develop collaborative opportunities in order to build the capacity of local organizations and communities to address regional social issues.



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Dark Skies Paonia was featured in the The North Fork Merchant Herald in June of this year.

A Network of Observatories

Along with International Dark Sky Certification, Dark Skies Paonia is working to connect people to the stars by hosting star viewing parties throughout the area. The group is in the process of creating a network of community observatories to make celestial viewing accessible to multiple people whenever there is a clear dark sky. Dark Skies Paonia is

seeking donations for observing equipment as well as parts for the observatory structures themselves. If you are interested in supporting their mission, or seeking International Dark Sky Certification for your own community, you can find out more on the Dark Skies Paonia website at www.darkskiespaonia.com.