

The Night Sky Isn't Black

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Meditations on Dark Skies

As a child, I considered myself to be a better-than-usual artist. I observed the world closely and tried earnestly to capture it on paper.



*A dark blue night sky in the country
Photo credit: Joshua Woroniecki*

I even went through a phase, for example, where I noticed that none of the other children ever drew nostrils on people's faces. I felt this was a great omission and insisted on drawing nostrils on all my people to make them look more realistic, albeit at the risk of making them look like pigs.

"It was manifestly obvious to me that the night sky is dark blue at best."

I also had strong feelings about the use of color. One of my recurring frustrations was how other children would frequently color the night sky black. Even adults did it in comics and cartoons. It irritated me endlessly because it was clear to me that "pitch-black night" wasn't a real thing. **It was manifestly obvious to me that the night sky is dark blue at best.** I grew up on a farm in Utah's rural Cache Valley in the 1980s, where I spent a lot of time outside at night. I remember, from a very young age, stubbornly coloring the night sky dark blue, from kindergarten through high school, and even in college.

There are multiple things going on in these memories, which I would like to highlight.

First of all, I lived in a rural environment and played outside a lot, both alone and with other children. My observations of the great outdoors were frequent and true to life for a girl who ran around the yard squealing with joy on summer nights, coming in at bedtime, sweaty, shoeless and tangle-haired. Sleeping outdoors in the yard with friends or my older brothers was a chance to play night games, tell ghost stories, cuddle with the barn cats, and gaze at the stars. So, if I felt that other children and adults hadn't actually spent enough time outside at night, I concluded they had likely missed the true color of the night sky.

Secondly, for my wild, night-oriented farmgirl superiority complex, I was never far from a streetlamp, flashlight, or porchlight. My ancestors had farmed for generations. My parents got enough "nature" with the plants and animals we had, struggling to make a living in a precarious vocation. We didn't camp or hike much, save for my brothers' occasional Boy Scout trips and my church camp when I was twelve. Even with these experiences we were never far from highway lights. Backpacking into a truly dark area was not something that ever crossed our minds. **It wasn't a time or place where people valued dark night skies.** Reflecting back, I never saw a truly dark sky until I was in college. Some of this was partly due to my gender, and some of it was my family and socioeconomic situation.



The author and her cat, in 1993

The author and her

Had my classmates truly seen black night skies and that's why they drew them black? I'll never know. There's still a part of me that firmly believes the night sky is dark blue. But it's clear to me now, in any case, that just living in a supposedly rural community may not have exposed me to the darkest of skies. The sky in the small town where I lived did not appear black.

Finally, for many, dark skies are out of reach in these postindustrial, capitalistic times. Archaeoastronomer Clive Ruggles asserts, "A substantial proportion of the world's population (especially in Western industrialised [*sic*] countries) may never in their lifetimes see (or even get the opportunity to see) a truly dark night sky; light pollution has served to remove them from 'their' sky as a source of inspiration" (p. 14).

There are many reasons people may never get to experience dark skies. In my case, I was a girl and not able to benefit from Boy Scouts activities at the time, unlike my older brothers. This was a sore point with me and other girls I knew. Why did the boys deserve to go hiking and camping, but not the girls? Girl Scouts wasn't a thing in Cache Valley in those days. It seemed that boys went camping all the time, while there was no programming that would consistently expose girls to dark skies.

Even so, I was still getting a lot more night sky exposure than other children of my generation. For the kids in nearby Salt Lake City—or even in Logan—it was unlikely they were allowed to spend much time outside at night. As dark sky scholars Tim Edensor and Nick Dunn note, giving the examples of Rocky Mount, North Carolina; Turku, Finland; London; and Hong Kong, a poorly lit city area may suggest lower social status, crime, and poverty to the city's inhabitants (pp. 10–11). Negative associations with dark skies can be powerful deterrents for dark sky interventions—and nighttime play—in cities.

And now that night sky tourism is growing worldwide, there are people who, for multiple reasons, may never have the chance to experience the Milky Way. In most human communities now, you must travel in order to reach dark skies. You are more likely to be a night skies tourist if you have resources such as reliable transportation; appropriate shoes, warm clothing, and gear; the financial security to leave your job for multiple days at a time; the physical ability to walk over rugged trails; and money to purchase an experience, national park entry and camping fees, or the help of a guide. While in some cases, darkness signals poverty and crime, in others, "hierarchical differentiations are being inverted; in an over-illuminated world darkness may now be sought as a

marker of status that differentiates wealthy from poorer, light-bound subjects and spaces" (*ibid.*, p. 10).

It wasn't always this way. Throughout history and regardless of geography and culture, humans have had important relationships with the night sky. Edensor and Dunn argue that, "before the advent of widespread artificial illumination, darkness shaped the enduring human experience of the night, largely ameliorated only by minimal forms of illumination, such as fire, sputtering candles, and rushlights" (p. 7). Sitting near a fire on a camping trip or lighting candles during a nighttime power outage gives us a sense of how our ancestors might have experienced darkness.



Lavender fields under the Milky Way
Photo credit: johnNaturePhotos (Pixabay)

As we work together to make dark night skies more accessible to all, we must keep in mind the many meanings and experiences of "darkness" that people have. The best solutions will take the meanings and experiences of multiple community stakeholders into account. There is no one-size-fits-all intervention. Edensor and Dunn argue for "creative, sustainable, and place-specific interventions" across not just dark sky sanctuaries and parks, but in rural and urban areas, as well (pp. 12–13).

References

- Edensor, Tim, and Nick Dunn. 2024. "Dark Skies: Meanings, Challenges, and Relationships," in Dunn and Edensor, eds., *Dark Skies: Places, Practices, Communities*. London: Routledge. [[Open Access link](#)]
- Ruggles, Clive. 2010. "Indigenous Astronomies and Progress in Modern Astronomy," *Proceedings of Science*, 99(5). <https://doi.org/10.22323/1.099.0029>.