

Support the Forces of Darkness

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People have a lot more of the unknown than the known in their minds. The unknown is great; it's like the darkness. Nobody made that. It just happens.

—Sun Ra

According to *The World Atlas of the Artificial Night Sky Brightness*, human civilization is drowning itself in luminous smog. The *Atlas* is a joint project of astrophysicists from Italy and Colorado and measures the level of perpetual industrial brightness that is reflecting off the inside rim of the sky.

Their report is horrifying: two-thirds of the world's population, and 99 percent of the population in the US (except Alaska and Hawaii) and the European Union, live in areas where the night sky is polluted by artificial light. One-fifth of the world's population, more than two-thirds of the US population, and more than one-half of the European Union population can no longer see the Milky Way with the naked eye. In many places in the Northern Hemisphere, the shimmering curtains of auroras are no longer visible.

The detrimental effects of outdoor lighting are poorly understood and rarely taken into account. For example, in addition to the environmental damage that comes from burning the fossil fuels needed to run electrical lighting brighter and more continuously, the natural diurnal rhythms of plants and animals are disrupted (lethally, in some cases) by the endless perpetuation of daylight hours.

This is especially the case for nocturnal and migratory wildlife. In many studies, mutations in plants from plankton to pumpkins have been explained by the proliferation of outdoor industrial lighting, as have fundamentally perilous changes in the spawning cycles of salmon. Elsewhere, on the militarized Texas-Mexico border, floodlights are jeopardizing the survival of ocelot and jaguarondi; in Florida, endangered sea turtle hatchlings are lured into nighttime parking lots instead of the ocean; and in the northeastern US, saturniid moth populations have been all but wiped out by artificial light at night.

The glare from inefficient lighting also harms human vision. Researchers have argued that artificial light profoundly disturbs the circadian cycle of neuro-endocrine activity (like melatonin release) to the point where it can be linked to chronic sleep loss, depression, reproductive irregularities and breast cancer. The toxic effect of the night sky's light pollution on the human capacity to create, to wonder, and to enjoy poetry and love-making has yet to be determined.

There are a number of liberal, reformist organizations—such as the International Dark-Sky Association, the British Astronomical Association's Campaign for Dark Skies, the New England Light Pollution Advisory Group, NYC's Sensible and Efficient Lighting to Enhance the Nighttime Environment, the Association Nationale pour la Protection du Ciel Nocturne, Toronto's Fatal Lighting Awareness Project—that are trying to conserve the night sky through the implementation of revised lighting design regulations and through changes to building and zoning codes.

These organizations work with municipal authorities and the biggest polluters of the night in an effort to convince them how dimmer lights might be more efficient and cost effective. The solutions offered by these groups

include raising awareness about light pollution among Boy Scout troops, selling “Got Milky Way?” t-shirts, and handing out awards to multi-million dollar architectural firms for “controlled glare,” “good nighttime ambiance,” and for “responsible lighting in an otherwise ‘light competitive’ environment.”

Surely, there is something more productive that can be done in the name of darkness besides pressuring engineering firms to use “quality outdoor lighting fixtures” and lobbying municipal zoning boards to install more closed-circuit television surveillance cameras instead of inefficient security lighting.

Look at the satellite photographs of last August’s blackout in the northeast US and Canada for inspiration. The night must be liberated from ridiculously over-lit billboards, car dealership lots, gas stations, convenience stores, those 24-hour restaurant chains that crassly spotlight their oversized US flags, and the other selfish aggressors who are waging perpetual war against it.

There needs to be direct action in defense of the dark.

The web site for *The World Atlas of the Artificial Night Sky Brightness*:

www.inquinamentoluminoso.it/dmsp/index.html

It provides up-to-the-minute information on zenith artificial night sky brightness at sea level all over the world.

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