

Starry nights on the Earth Day horizon

Bruce Dorries 6:55 p.m. EST March 7, 2015



(Photo: Submitted)

To catch a disappearing act, keep an eye on the heavens. Gazing up at the night skies over the years, you'll notice that the stars fade away, then vanish.

Right before our eyes, untold security lights erase the darkness that maintains life's balance and humanity's connection to the cosmos. Obsolete lighting technology diminishes the night sky, endangers health, and unwittingly threatens the lives of wild creatures that rely on darkness and the heavens' guidance for survival.

For more than a century, we've celebrated the disappearance of darkness as progress, thinking that as the night shrinks our security expands. Thankfully, though, we're beginning to see that too much of a good thing is bad for us.

Mounting scientific evidence proves that the natural cycles of light and dark, night and day, promote our well being. Sleep disorders, mental illness and increased risk of cancer are just some of the consequences of broadcasting artificial illumination into the night sky and blue screen lighting within our homes well into the wee hours.

Other costs stack up: We waste \$110 billion worldwide each year in excessive, misdirected artificial light. Much of that financial burden shows up in government budgets and consumers' bills. In addition to light pollution, misguided electric illumination, generated with fossil fuels, spews more than 750 million tons of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere, accelerating global warming. Black magic is costly.

Want to see the worst and best of outdoor lighting in Staunton? Start downtown on Beverley Street.

Low-quality fixtures on our main street cast unattractive, blinding glare. "Light trespass" reaches into upper-story apartments, which makes living there less than dreamy. The unnatural sky glow rising above roof tops screens the night sky view from residents and visitors alike. It's a scene that's bad for business, lousy for slumber and not a good look for the Queen.

Churchville Avenue's lighting creates a night-and-day contrast. High-efficiency fixtures there reflect the town's historic preservation ethos. The stretch from the public library to Gypsy Hill Park demonstrates how outdoor lighting can be done with class. Gentle but effective illumination funnels down to reveal people, sidewalks and traffic. It concentrates focus for drivers and pedestrians. Less is clearly more.

Staunton needs more such lighting in many places. Want more evidence? Then plan to pack your calendar with 10 programs during the next month to learn more about the health, waste and environmental problems associated with light pollution.

First, featured at "Starry Night Staunton," will be Shanil Virani, the director of the John C. Wells Planetarium at James Madison University. The Shenandoah Valley Stargazer Club will help Virani with the nocturnal wakeup call at 7 p.m. March 26 in Francis Auditorium at Mary Baldwin College.

"In the Valley, we are at a crossroads," Virani notes. "Our light fixtures are antiquated and need to be replaced. With our next moves we have a tremendous opportunity to be a positive example to the rest of the state and the nation. Now is the ideal time to learn more about the lighting plans of [cities and counties] in the Valley."

Virani and Paul Bogard, author of the critically acclaimed book "The End of Night: Searching for Natural Darkness in an Age of Artificial Light," will raise awareness about light pollution all that week with talks and slides in Harrisonburg, Charlottesville, Lexington and Staunton.

Earth Day Staunton picked up on the JMU duo's title, making "Starry Night" the theme for this year's extended teach-in and green activities. Here's what's been given the green light for 2015:

"The City Dark," a one-hour documentary about why night skies matter, will screen at 7 p.m., April 8, at the Staunton Public Library.

"Stars in the Night Sky," a program and telescope viewing, will be led by the Shenandoah Valley Stargazer Club at 7 p.m. April 14 at the Frontier Culture Museum.

At 7 p.m. on April 16 at FCM, Rick Reynolds with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries will shed light on what's happening to our bats. The biologist will show and tell about the night fliers' biology, discuss a disease that is killing large numbers of the winged mammal and demonstrate how to build a bat house.

Earth Day Staunton '15, the crowning event, runs from 9 a.m. to noon on April 18 on Byers Street and at the Sunspots Pavilion. Get your greens at the Farmers' Market as well as celebrate Earth Day at the family-friendly event. Solarize Augusta will sponsor a self-guided solar home tour that afternoon. Come sundown, Wild Virginia's Wild & Scenic Environmental Film Festival will showcase short movies on green themes, some darker than others, at 7 p.m. at Blue Ridge Community College.

Kites and Critters, a family event sponsored by Valley Conservation Council, will celebrate spring — let's hope — and protected open spaces inside Staunton city limits, 1-5 p.m., April 19, on Bells Lane.

For the finale, April 22, renowned globe-trotting birder Dr. John Spahr will share images and discuss "Owls: Birds of Mystery and Majesty" at 7:30 p.m. at the Staunton Public Library.

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