

The Night Sky

by Liz Gibbons

Looking up at the night sky on a clear night without the interference of light from civilization I experience an expansive feeling into a mysterious universe that I am seldom aware of during the daylight hours. It causes me to reflect on my place in this cosmos and to ponder its vastness. Taking many camping trips as a child and with my own children and husband I have memories of twinkling starry nights with the moon lighting our way back to our campsite and feeling completely at peace in that environment.

It is unfortunate that humankind in its present materialistic and narcissistic approach to life does not realize the effect that light pollution has upon the life cycles of many plants and animals. Light is so common. How could it be a pollutant? Plants and animals function on a 24-hour circadian rhythm. This cyclic rhythm of light and dark governs the life functions in animals including digestion and nourishment, reproduction, sleep patterns, and protection. In plants it affects such processes as germination, leaf movement, photosynthesis, and fragrance emission. These patterns are encoded in the DNA of all plants and animals.

Consider nocturnal animals. They sleep during the day and hunt prey at night. Nighttime light pollution makes their life just one long day. Sea turtles come onto the beach at night to lay their eggs in the sand. The hatchlings instinctively know to follow the bright horizon to get to the sea. But artificial light often draws them inland, causing their death.

Migratory birds or birds that hunt at night use the moonlight and starlight as navigation tools. Artificial light often draws them off their natural course. Millions of birds die each year from flying into illuminated buildings or towers. Artificial light can be a fatal attraction for many insects. This depletes the food supply for many animals and destroys the insect pollinators necessary for many plants.

There is an awareness developing of the need to decrease light pollution. This means using lighting judiciously by balancing the need for lighting with awareness of its impact on the environment. By shielding light and directing it downward much light pollution will be eliminated. Using lights only where needed and eliminating unnecessary nighttime illumination in buildings such as leaving lights on in offices will make a big improvement. With such changes the night sky can be protected without throwing civilization back into the Dark Ages.