



# Looking up at darker skies



Stargazing (Credit: Forestry Commission Scotland)

The Science and Technology Facilities Council's (STFC) Dark Sky programmes, led from the Royal Observatory Edinburgh site, have turned the search for dark skies into an environmental asset for tourism, education and communities in the UK.

Dark skies are found in rural areas that are free of urban light pollution, making them ideal places to view our night sky with the naked eye. From a city centre location we might see fewer than 100 stars with our naked eyes. Under a dark sky we can see over 1,000 stars - even our own galaxy, the Milky Way, stretching across the sky. UK astronomers seek out the darkest locations around the world - and in space - for their powerful scientific telescopes.

Since 2006, STFC has used the quest for darker skies within the UK as one of the focuses for its public engagement programme.

More than 50 community Dark Sky events have been held throughout Scotland in both urban and rural areas. These events have inspired schools, communities and tourists with accessible activities and projects. More than 800 teachers and educators have been trained to run Dark Sky activities and two communities have identified

their local Dark Sky Discovery Site as the best local spot to do some stargazing.

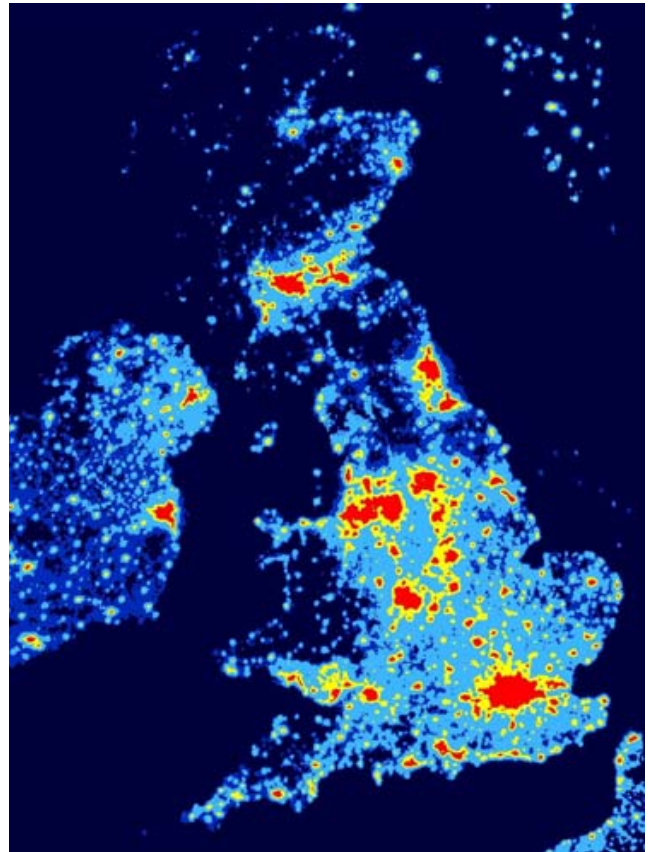
A major development in 2009, as part of the International Year of Astronomy, was the establishment of Galloway Forest Dark Sky Park as the first Dark Sky Park in Europe. A massive achievement for the UK and the south-west of Scotland, the park has been set up by the Forestry Commission Scotland which is a partner in the Dark Sky Scotland programme.

This year will be the park's first full season of observing and early signs of its popularity are very encouraging. In August 2010, nearly 3,000 people visited the Dark Sky Park pages of the Galloway Forest Park website - 15 times more hits than any other topic on the website. It is expected that the Dark Sky Park will increase the regional economic impact of the Galloway Forest Park which currently attracts 0.8 million visitors each year and contributes 10% of the tourism GDP for Galloway. The Dark Sky Park is actively helping and encouraging local businesses to take advantage of this new initiative. It is hoped that the new Dark Sky Park will help to strengthen the delicate rural economy in Galloway.

STFC's Dark Sky programmes are having a truly inspirational effect on those communities it is

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engaging with, helping to educate and inspire a range of people. The search for dark skies has also developed assets for tourism meaning that this programme is having an impact on the social, economic, environmental and cultural well being of the country.



Light pollution in the UK in 2000 (Credit: Campaign to Protect Rural England)

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