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Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)



That starlight should be a common heritage would seem beyond question to most people – yet those same people probably little realize that they are being “robbed” each night of the ability to see just that heritage!! We have, as we become more and more urbanized, lost the ability to see the stars which informed the lives of our ancestors, and we are polluting ourselves with more and more light. While the research on the effects of light pollution is still very new, the reports in this volume have some clear warnings – we should be careful!!

But the heritage of starlight is a fascinating topic, covering everything from Astronomy to rhythms of plants and animals, from the role of protected places for nature in conserving starlight as well to the enormous cultural heritage coming from the stars. Losing that heritage, like any other, diminishes us as humans just a little.

The present volume stems from a conference organized on the island of La Palma in April 2007. All involved in this organisation are to be congratulated for having the vision and courage to bring together the participants to talk through these issues. It was an unusual conference bringing together participants from many quite disparate areas of endeavour, whose common purpose was to talk about the issue of Starlight heritage, or dark sky heritage. Holding the conference on the biosphere reserve of La Palma was itself significant as here is one of the best collection of observatories which are anchored to the earth.

The following pages tell the stories that all brought to this meeting, but there was an enduring theme amongst all – we have to act soon to ensure their starlight heritage will not only be conserved but improved. The global need to reduce energy demands will have its own positive impact, but perhaps the most interesting aspect where positive action can occur is recognition that protected places for nature have also a key role as protected places for dark sky.

Not only the world’s natural and cultural heritage is thus concentrated in these places, but also starlight heritage as well! But this issue has not been recognized by protected place managers and authorities and we need a re-orientation of ideas to achieve this. Likewise, seeing that tourism can have benefits in this direction was a positive development, although of course all our actions can work both for and against the conservation of starlight heritage.

What is clear is that after this conference no-one will ignore this issue, it must become integrated into many agendas, from science, heritage management, tourism developments, even the manufacture and design of lighting facilities. It is also clear that getting back in touch with the wonder our ancestors felt when seeing in full clarity the sky at night will do wonders for our spirit, and help us cope with this most difficult of centuries that people have yet had to endure on this ever-smaller planet. I encourage all who read this volume and its contents, from whatever perspective, to take inspiration, and importantly action, to help conserve our starlight heritage!