

# Exmoor – Europe’s first International Dark Sky Reserve

On 2011 October 9 Exmoor National Park in the southwest of England was designated as Europe’s first International Dark Sky Reserve by the International Dark Skies Association. This is a huge achievement, and follows three years of work by park authorities, local astronomers, lighting engineers and the resident community. Exmoor Dark Sky Reserve follows in the footsteps of Galloway Forest Dark Sky Park, set up in 2009, and Sark Dark Sky Island, established in January 2011.



Emma Dennis, landscape officer for Exmoor National Park Authority and the driving force behind the creation of the Dark Sky Reserve, began work on the project in 2009 as part of the International Year of Astronomy’s Dark Sky Awareness Cornerstone objective. It had long been known that the southwest of England had exceptional dark skies, and a relatively favourable climate for astronomy.

The designation followed months of painstaking dark sky surveys, some of the most detailed that have been carried out in the UK, as well as the creation of a strict set of lighting controls governing all new developments within the national park.

Dr Nigel Stone, Chief Executive of Exmoor

National Park, said: ‘We are delighted that the importance of dark skies, one of Exmoor National Park’s special qualities, has received this international recognition and we would like to thank all those who have helped in achieving this International Dark Sky Reserve award. We look forward to welcoming many more visitors in the future to enjoy the starlit skies at night as well as the spectacular scenery Exmoor has to offer during the day.’ [example below – Ed.]

The designation was sought for two main reasons: 1) the park authority, working with the Campaign to Protect Rural England, recognises and values tranquillity as a key asset, and a dark sky is part of that mission; and 2) there is a real opportunity for Exmoor National Park to ex-

tend its tourist season throughout the winter months by using the dark skies to attract astrotourists, something already being done by Sark and Galloway Forest Park.

Exmoor’s designation now means that the UK has a ‘full-house’ of IDA designations – the only country in the world to have this – in that it has a Dark Sky Park (Galloway Forest Park), a Dark Sky Community (Sark) and a Dark Sky Reserve (Exmoor). The differences between these designations are important. The Dark Sky Park designation is intended for parks with little or no human population (the model being US National Parks). Dark Sky Community status is aimed at communities – towns, cities, islands – that want to preserve their night sky. And Dark Sky Reserve status, while meant for large parks also, allows communities to exist within the Reserve, surrounding a dark sky core which is strictly protected, while public engagement and awareness-raising of the issues of light pollution spreads from that core to the surrounding reserve.

Exmoor National Park Authority was supported in its efforts by a grant from the British Astronomical Association that enabled it to engage the services of a qualified lighting engineer to write its lighting management plan.

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