



International Dark-Sky Association

"... to preserve and protect the nighttime environment and our heritage of dark skies"

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SARK ISLAND AND HORTOBÁGY NATIONAL PARK EARN DARK SKY STATUS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DARK-SKY ASSOCIATION

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The International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) announces designation of Europe's first International Dark Sky Community and third international Dark Sky Park. Sark Island, a Channel Island protectorate of the United Kingdom near the coast of Normandy, France, was designated a Silver Tier International Dark Sky Community on 25 January. Hortobágy Starry Sky Park in Eastern Hungary was announced as a Silver Tier International Dark Sky Park at the same time.

Less than a dozen sites worldwide have earned this prestigious distinction. Previous designations include Galloway Forest Park in Scotland and Zselic National Landscape Protection Area in Hungary.

These designations are exceptional not for their excellent management initiatives, but for the way each location tailored a dark sky conservation plan that accentuates site-specific goals.

Hortobágy, Hungary's first national park and second IDSPark, encompasses the largest continuous native grassland in Europe. It is recognized as a World Heritage site, Ramsar site, and Biosphere Reserve. Largely untouched since the last ice age, Hortobágy's ancient marshland and alkaline flats provide a haven for wildlife, especially birds.

Hortobágy is the most important bird area of the entire Carpathian Basin region, home to 159 species of nesting birds and host to an additional 178 migrating species. This crucial corridor supports near extinct species such as the Slender-billed Curlew and sees migrating populations of up to 300,000.

The lighting management plan focuses on avian protection. Lighting retrofits within the 10,000 hectares designated as Hortobágy Starry Sky Park minimize impact to avian wildlife. However, astronomical interests are not neglected. The park offers nighttime walks and interpretive programs that include light pollution education, and the park plans to open an observatory.

Zoltán Kolláth, president of the Hungarian Astronomical Association and leader of IDA Hungary, coordinated action with stalwart assistance from astronomical groups, the Hortobágy National Park Directorate (HPND) and the Hortobágy Nature Conservation. He has been raising awareness of light pollution in Hungary since Zselic was named an IDSPark two years ago, and notes that the two IDSPark designations have helped prompt

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modifications in Hungarian environmental protection law to include light pollution. Kolláth writes, “We hope that the official recognition of the Hortobágy Starry Sky Park will not only help in the protection of the nocturnal values of the area, but it will launch new steps in Hungarian legislation for protection of the starry sky and the livable environment.”

Sark Island’s IDSCommunity status will add another distinction to its already beguiling allure to tourists. Sark’s blend of history and culture attracts up to 40,000 tourists per year. Sark has neither public lighting nor motor vehicles beyond tractors used for farming; life on this singular island connotes a step back in time. A rich Milky Way is visible thanks to Sark’s island location, its generally low use of residential and commercial electricity, and of course its striking absence of public street lights.

In becoming Europe’s first IDSCommunity, Sark has preserved its anachronistic charm while embracing sustainability and creating purposeful directive for future lighting practices. Sark is already offering astrotourism options to tourists. Residents also want future lighting guidelines to add to the island’s character.

To preserve sky quality, Sark’s government has pledged to conform any future lighting to IDSCommunity requirements. Since the island has no public lighting to retrofit, much of the heavy lifting required to demonstrate a commitment to dark skies is being efficiently handled by the island’s residents. Several of the large hotels on the island have refitted or modified their lights, along with the school, the hall, and numerous other prominent buildings, improving even more the quality of Sark’s night sky.

Steve Owens, a member of the British Astronomical Association’s Campaign for Dark Skies and driving force behind the IDSPlace designation at Galloway Forest Park in Scotland, is chief coordinator of Sark Island’s outdoor lighting management plan. He expects a high level of success from Sark’s designation, explaining, “It was clear to me when I began working with the community on Sark that they realize how precious and rare their view of the night sky is. The decision to seek designation as an International Dark Sky Place was really supported by everyone on the island, and great efforts were made to improve lighting, both by individuals and businesses, who see the benefit of astronomy as a way of supporting the local economy during the winter.”