Public interest in Northumberland’s dark skies shows no sign of slowing down. This year, we have heard exciting new plans by Kielder Observatory Astronomical Society to develop their facility, and seen the opening of the Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre on Hadrian’s Wall, which will also host many more stargazing and business training events in future.

Northumberland County Council have continued with their replacement street lighting scheme, and at a more local level, plans are afoot to engage with landowners and residents in the Dark Sky Park to promote best practice in the design and installation of dark-sky friendly outside lighting.

1. ENJOY THE DARKNESS

In the dark about the Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre

Since it opened, The Sill has welcomed more than 30,000 visitors through its doors.

Built by the National Park Authority, this iconic building, is located right on the boundary of Hadrian’s Wall World Heritage Site, and hosts a permanent exhibition that celebrates our natural and cultural landscapes (including a section about our dark skies), a cafe, a learning centre, a rural business hub, a shop, a walk-on grass roof that leads to a viewing platform (day & night), as well as an 86-bed youth hostel, run by the Youth Hostel Association (England & Wales).

Funded generously by the Heritage Lottery Fund, it aims to welcome, accommodate and inspire the next generation of visitors to become aware of and care our heritage, including the need to conserve our beautiful dark skies.

This winter, it will host our stargazing programme including astro-photography workshops and tourism business training seminars.

Look out for our events at: www.thesill.org.uk
Kielder Observatory Astronomical Society Report

Kielder Observatory Astronomical Society is very pleased to announce that over the past year it has seen 96.8% occupancy; a clear indication of the popularity of the facility, and continuing a trend that is increasing year-on-year.

What is perhaps more significant and satisfying though, are the many positive trip advisor reviews received by the Observatory and its team of dedicated staff and volunteers, which paints a healthy picture for the future.

A snapshot of key successes, KOAS:
- now employs 9 full-time staff
- delivers more than 650 events every year
- has raised £250,000 to build a new astro imaging / research facility (currently under construction)
- is developing a science initiative with local educators to assist in the teaching of astronomy
- has the most advanced suite of instruments and observatory outside of academia in the UK
- welcomed more than 20,000 visitors last year
- has 5 astrophysicists on its academic staff

For more information about events at the Kielder Observatory, go to: https://www.kielderobservatory.org

Making a star appearance

Throughout the year, we have taken our Lunt 80mm solarscope to a number of local events and festivals, mainly to show visitors something truly memorable, but also to engage them about the Dark Sky Park, on their doorstep.

These have ranged from a Farmers Market in the centre of Hexham on a Saturday morning, to a Roman Cavalry re-enactment in the City of Carlisle, which lies to the west of the Dark Sky Park boundary, see below.

Many attending a number of sporting events in the Dark Sky Park have also seen the beauty of the night skies above them. This September, we packed a 10” dob into the back of the van, and camped out with 400 MTB riders taking part in the Naughty Northumbrian MTB Enduro event.

All who looked through the telescope were captivated by the clarity of the dark skies above, many having travelled from light-polluted cities to attend the event, now promising to return.
Increasing star appeal

Northumberland Tourism Ltd, one of the key members of the Northumberland International Dark Sky Steering Group has continued to promote Northumberland’s “dark side” in its autumn/winter marketing campaign for 2016/17. The findings from the evaluation research highlighted some interesting results, including a Klout score of 72%, showing a high level of engagement with our audiences on the theme of dark skies and stargazing.

78% of respondents to the survey who had visited Northumberland came between September and March and the average total spend per visit was £730, showing that dark skies tourism is contributing to the local economy and helping to reduce seasonality.

Tourism businesses continue to see the light!

The Dark-Sky friendly scheme initiated by Northumberland Tourism Ltd is still being promoted to rural accommodation providers. A snap shot survey undertaken by the National Park Authority of accredited businesses has highlighted a need for more stargazing events to be hosted in the north and east of the Dark Sky Park, and additional business training workshops.

With that in mind, the Authority will be organising two more ‘Star Tips for Profit’ workshops with astronomer, Richard Daron on the 18th November and 12th February 2018.

More details will be posted on our website: https://www.northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk/whats-on

2) KEEP THE DARKNESS

Planners shine in the dark

The National Park Authority planning team has continued its vigilance on development in the National Park, using the opportunity when offering pre-application advice to developers, to be aware of the Dark Sky Park conditions and advising them on their need for and use of appropriate outside lighting in their proposals.

An example being the Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre, a significant development, which following planning guidance, only required a few fully-shielded down-lit bollards to light the footpaths to the front of the building. No other external lighting was necessary.

Other development receiving advice included a new micro-brewery, where only fully-shielded lighting was allowed, and a lodge development in Bellingham, where car-park lighting was reduced in height and a lower lumen output agreed upon. Advice was also given to developers of new holiday lodges in Kielder to ensure that their outside lights were compliant.

Inviting others to the dark side

The Local Plan forms the basis for determining planning applications within the National Park. The Authority is currently reviewing the existing Local Plan and is running six community consultation events in October. As well as promoting our Good Practice Guide For Outside Lighting in Northumberland International Dark Sky Park to those attending, we will also be displaying different lighting fixtures to promote best practice.

European Dark Skies Conference

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere, in partnership with Galloway Forest Dark Sky Park and with the support of the IDA, held the first European Dark Skies Conference on the 20th – 22nd September at Gatehouse of Fleet.

Delegates from all over the world were invited to hear speakers on topics that ranged from the cultural associations with the dark, to the health implications of light pollution. Duncan Wise, representing Northumberland International Dark Sky Park gave a talk on the success of astro-
tourism in Northumberland since receiving its designation in 2013, and highlighted the need to educate visitors about the effects of light pollution at every opportunity using some lights and a balloon!

Street lighting improvements

The County Council’s £25 million project to modernise all the street lights in the county with better designed (fully shielded) LED technology is now entering its final phase.

Within the Dark Sky Park, a total of 107 lanterns will be replaced in the villages of Harbottle, Rochester, Byrness, Elsdon, Kielder, Lanehead, Greenhaugh, Falstone and Stonehaugh.

The Authority is also working closely with the Ministry of Defence to draft new policy guidelines on minimising light pollution in the revision of the joint landscape management plan for the Otterburn Training Area.

Beyond the Dark Sky Park

The North Pennines AONB Partnership has been active over the last year in dark sky conservation. Public and educational events were held as part of the three-year ‘Discovering Northern Dark Skies’ programme – funded by the Science & Technology Facilities Council.

Development of the new North Pennines Observatory has continued apace – the new facility in the Allen Valleys was officially opened in October 2017 and is now the home of the fledgling North Pennines Astronomy Society. At the end of the year the Partnership developed the first North Pennines-wide Stargazing Festival – funded by Visit County Durham.

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We use these hashtags for the NIDSP:
#NlandDarkSkyPark  #Nlandstars  #npenndarkskies