

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Elan Valley Estate Achieves International Dark Sky Park Status In World First

ELAN VALLEY, Wales, 17 July 2015 – Elan Valley Astronomy in conjunction with the International Dark Sky Association (IDA) and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, proudly announced a world first in the creation of the Elan Valley International Dark Sky Park at 10am on Friday 17th July 2015. The picturesque Elan Valley Estate in the heart of the Cambrian Mountains created history by becoming the world's first privately owned, but publicly accessed International Dark Sky Park.

Dark Sky Park-Silver Tier status was granted by the International Dark Sky Association (IDA) based in Arizona, U.S. Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water's Elan Valley Estate is Wales' First IDA Dark Sky Park.

What makes the Elan Valley Estate's achievement even more remarkable is that all the IDA application work was done in house by two local amateur astronomers, Les and Kris Fry of Elan Valley Astronomy, now volunteer Astronomy Rangers and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water Estate Rangers.

Les and Kris, of EVA, thanked all members and organisations who had contributed in attaining this accolade. Les said, "It's absolutely amazing how much we have achieved as amateur astronomers. We want to show other people that you don't need to be a big corporate concern to gain Dark Sky status, the common person can also protect their sky and environment from light pollution."

Kris continued, "We would like to see communities expand the protected Dark Sky areas to cover the whole of the Cambrian Mountains and in the future hope to create what Bob Mizon, Director of the British Astronomical Association's Commission for Dark Skies, called Wales' 'Arc Of Dark'. And we look forward to the inevitable boost to the local economy that the associated astrotourism should bring.

The process to become an International Dark Sky Park began in November 2012. Les and Kris worked with Estate Rangers, who with the assistance of the Estate residents, Powys Council, Severn Trent and Welsh Water, helped the whole of the 180 square kilometer estate lands become protected against Light Pollution – really just plain light wastage – for the benefit of humankind and the abundance of flora and fauna found within the park boundaries.

More than 200 individual light readings were taken at 13 sites over a 22-month period to demonstrate that the Estate would fit the criteria for this status. Analysis of the data revealed that the estate *"possessed exceptional starry skies and natural nocturnal habitat where light pollution is mitigated and natural darkness is valuable as an important educational, cultural, scenic, and natural resource"*. This is one of the primary conditions for granting International Dark Sky Park status and so ideal for stargazing.

With the Limiting Magnitude, (a measure of how faint a star is visible) varying from 6.3 – 6.8 across the Estate and an average reading of 6.5, the IDA accepted the decision to consider the whole of the Estate Lands as one single Dark Sky core unit, and not to break up the Park into small “core” sections as other applicants have done.

As a charitable organisation, established in 1989 by Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, the Elan Valley Trust aim to protect the biodiversity of the Estate Lands, amounting to some 180 sq. km. in the geographical heart of Wales. Managing 12 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, a National Nature Reserve and home to many rare plant and animal species, this privately owned but publicly accessed estate now extends that same care to the dark skies above it as well.

Ed Parsons, Area Lands Manager for Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, said: “I’m very excited that our spectacular night sky has been recognised by the International Dark Sky Association. This global recognition is testament to the hard work of our rangers and voluntary astronomers, without whom this would not have been possible.”

“I would also like to thank the Elan Valley Trust for their support from the beginning of this process. We will continue to work in partnership with them and local residents to protect and enhance this feature of the estate and welcome visitors to experience a truly dark sky at night.”

IDA executive director, J. Scott Feierabend, said: “Today IDA takes a major step forward in dark skies conservation by welcoming the Elan Valley as the first-ever privately owned International Dark Sky Park. Moving into the realm of private land conservation significantly extends the reach of protections for the natural night time environment.”

It is a sad fact that around 90% of the UK population live under skies polluted by waste lighting. Bob Mizon stated, “It is really exciting to see the Elan Valley joining the ranks of those places worldwide who are protecting our heritage of starry skies above. We look forward to the time when everyone will have the optimum night sky over them.”

The Brecon Beacons National Park which, due to its size, gained the classification of International Dark Sky Reserve - Silver Tier status in 2013. As we speak, Snowdonia National Park is also preparing to submit its Dark Sky Reserve application to the IDA.

John Barentine, Dark Sky Places Project Manager in Tucson, Arizona, said: “We’re thrilled by the outcome and what this means for Wales. With other sites in the application process, *Wales will lead the entire world in terms of countries with the largest fraction of their land subject to dark skies protection.*”

Kelvyn Curry (CSP-County Councillor) added, “I’m glad the improved lighting has made a difference and has helped in gaining the IDA DSP status! I concentrated on getting LED lamps that direct the light downwards and made Elan Village and the road that leads from Cwmdauddwr up the valley a priority. Since then a large number of lamps have been up-graded in Rhayader and Cwmdauddwr, and earlier this year all the lamps on the A470 trunk road through Rhayader were up-graded.”

Focusing on the astrotourism potential, Richard Smith, of Cambrian Safaris, said: “At Cambrian Safaris, we work closely with the accommodation sector and the local community to promote the area’s natural attractions. We aim to encourage people to come again by giving them ideas of places to explore for themselves. “We now run evening tours all year round and organise astronomy sessions with Elan Valley Astronomy, who worked so hard to gain the Dark Sky Status for the Elan Valley Estate. Dark Sky status will be a great help in putting the Cambrian Mountains on the map.”

Val Hawkins, chief executive of MWT, an independent organisation representing tourism and hospitality businesses in Mid Wales, said the announcement was “fantastic” news for the Elan Valley and Mid Wales as a whole.

“International Dark Sky Park status reinforces everything that is special about Mid Wales with our unspoilt, natural environment and spectacular night sky,” she added. “And we are only two hours from some of the largest cities in the UK. Hopefully more people will now come and visit Mid Wales to experience some of the natural wonders that they have on their doorstep.”

With the Elan Valley joining the ranks, there are now 26 Dark Sky Parks in the World including Galloway Forest Park in Scotland, Death Valley National Park in California, De Boschplaat in the Netherlands and Eifel International Dark Sky Park in Germany.

The Elan Valley International Dark Sky Park now embark on their plans to further improve lighting standards within their control, and to create specific astronomically orientated viewing sites at several locations across the Park.

Astronomical events run by the volunteer Astro Rangers and Elan Valley Astronomy have been taking place at the Elan Valley for a number of years now, and are listed in the annual “Elan Valley Events Guide”. This is complimented by the EV web site for more up to the minute details at www.elanvalley.org.uk The EVA also hold Astronomy events and talks around Mid Wales.

For more information on Elan Valley Astronomy email: elanvalleyastronomy@gmail.com or join them on www.facebook.com/EVastronomy

Contact with the Elan Valley Visitors Centre, open 363 days of the year, can be made by phone on 01597 810880 or email elanrangers@dwrcymru.com. For those interested in accommodation within or nearby the Elan Valley, seek out the “Stay” webpage at www.elanvalleytrust.org.uk/stay or email info@elanvalleytrust.org or phone on 01597 810449

NB: We will be holding our Official Grand Opening on October 29th 2015. All media will be invited to our day of celebration, which we hope will lead into the night under clear skies!
We also hope to invite special Astronomical guests!