



Starlight Initiative and the La Palma Declaration

4 de mayo de 2007



The secretary general attended a meeting of the Starlight initiative, supported by the Canary islands Government, on La Palma from 19 - 21 April.

This meeting was particularly interesting in terms of the novelty of the subject matter, bring together Astrophysicists and nature conservations, and examining the role of clear night skies from the perspective of culture, science and nature conservation.

It was clear from the discussions that nature conservation sites have a role to play in enhancing places which are less light polluted, as well as all their other functions. It was also clear that light pollution can cause dysfunctional behaviors in various wildlife species, and this also needs to be taken into account when considering conservation issues.

The main conclusions from the meeting were a declaration and resolution for action, which, *inter alia*, suggests keeping the Convention involved in the discussions, with other related MEA's and UN bodies. Further detail on the declaration is below, and more information on the whole event and background is available at <http://www.starlight2007.net/>.

The Government of the canary islands is to be congratulated on promoting this interesting initiative, with the support of UNESCO.



DECLARATION
IN DEFENCE OF THE NIGHT SKY

AND THE RIGHT TO STARLIGHT (La Palma Declaration)

The participants in the International Conference in Defence of the Quality of the Night Sky and the Right to Observe the Stars, meeting in La Palma, Canary Islands, Spain, on the 19th and 20th of April 2007,

Aware that a view of the starlight has been and is an inspiration for all humankind, that its observation has represented an essential element in the development of all cultures and civilisations, and taking into account that, throughout history, the contemplation of the firmament has sustained many of the scientific and technical developments that define progress.

Guided by the principles announced in the preamble of the Declaration of 2009 as International Year of Astronomy, which defines the sky as a common and universal heritage and an integral part of the environment perceived by humankind. Recalling that humankind has always observed the sky either to interpret it or to understand the physical laws governing the universe, and that this interest in astronomy has had profound implications for science, philosophy, culture, and our general conception of the universe.

Recognising that the quality of the night sky and, therefore, the capacity to access the light of stars and other celestial bodies within the Universe, is deteriorating at an alarming rate in several areas, that its contemplation is increasingly difficult, and that this process faces us with the generalised loss of a cultural, scientific and natural resource with unforeseeable consequences.

Conscious that the deterioration of the clarity of the night space is starting to emerge as a serious risk to the continuity of astronomic observations, a branch of science that presently provides a flow of direct and indirect benefits that are increasingly valued.

Bearing in mind that the Rio Conference of 1992 proclaimed the necessity to defend the "integral and interdependent nature of the Earth", and that this defence naturally includes the dimension of the night skies and the quality of the atmosphere.

Recalling that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of Future Generations states that persons belonging to future generations have the right to an uncontaminated and undamaged Earth, including pure skies, and that they are entitled to its enjoyment as the ground of human history of culture and social bonds that make each generation and individual a member of one human family.

Remindful of the validity of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and of the different international declarations on sustainable development and the conventions and protocols concerning the environment, safeguarding cultural diversity, biological diversity, and the landscape, including, by the same token, those concerning the conservation of cultural heritage and curbing climate change, all of which have a direct or indirect influence on the need to safeguard the clarity of the night skies.

Considering that the scientific, cultural, educational, environmental, safety, and energy benefits of preserving a dark night sky need urgent attention and action taking.

Aware of the need to establish efficient and urgent alliances between the leading players, whose decisions can have an influence on reversing the process of degradation that is affecting the quality of the night sky, with a view to provide all the possible assistance needed to protect and conserve the cultural and natural heritage of Starlight.

APPEAL to the International Community, and, in particular, URGE governments, other authorities and public institutions, decision makers, planners and professionals, private institutions and associations concerned, the world of science and of culture, and all citizens individually, to adopt the following principles and objectives of this declaration:

1.

The right to an unpolluted night sky that allows the enjoyment of the contemplation of the firmament should be considered an inalienable right of humankind equivalent to all other environmental, social, and cultural rights, due to its impact on the development of all peoples and on the conservation of bio-diversity.

2.

The progressive degradation of the night sky must be considered an imminent risk that must be faced, in the same

fashion as the main problems concerning resources and the environment are addressed.

3.

The conservation, protection, and revaluation of the natural and cultural heritage associated with night landscapes and the observation of the firmament represents a prime opportunity and obligation for co-operation in safeguarding the quality of life. For all decision makers, this attitude implies a genuine challenge involving cultural and scientific innovation, requiring a major constant effort to enable us to rediscover the presence of the night sky as a living part of our heritage.

4.

Access to knowledge, armed with education, is the key to allow the integration of science into our present culture, contributing to the advance of humankind. The dissemination of astronomy and the scientific and cultural values associated with the contemplation of the universe should be considered as basic contents to be included in educational activities in all areas, impossible to fulfil without a reasonably unpolluted sky and proper training of educators in these subjects.

5.

The negative effects of emissions and of the increased intrusion of artificial light on the atmospheric quality of night skies in protected areas have an impact on several species, habitats and natural ecosystems. The minimisation of obtrusive light must be a basic element of nature conservation policies and should be implemented to the management plans of the different types of protected areas to fulfil their mission in protecting nature and biological diversity.

6.

Mindful that a starry night sky forms an integral part of the landscape that is perceived by the inhabitants of each territory, including urban areas, the landscape policies established in the different juridical systems need to take on board the pertinent standards aimed to preserve the quality of the night sky, allowing to guarantee the common right to contemplate the firmament.

7.

The intelligent use of artificial lighting that minimises sky glow and avoids obtrusive visual impact on both humans and wildlife has to be promoted. Public administrations, those in the lighting industry, and decision makers should also ensure that all users of artificial light do so responsibly as part of an integral part of planning and energy sustainability policies, which should be supported by light pollution measuring, both from the ground and from space. This attitude would involve a more efficient use of energy so as to meet the wider commitments made on climate change, and for the protection of the environment.

8.

Areas suitable for unimpaired astronomic observation constitute an asset in short supply on our planet, and their conservation represents a minimum effort in comparison with the benefits they contribute to our know-how and to scientific and technological development. The protection of sky quality in these singular places must be given priority in regional, national, and international scientific and environmental policies. The measures and provisions must be made to safeguard clear skies and to protect such spaces from the harmful effects of light, radio-electric emissions, and air pollution.

9.

Tourism can become a major instrument for a new alliance in defence of the quality of the night sky. Responsible tourism can and should take on board the night sky as a resource to protect and value in every destination. Generating new tourist products based on the observation of the firmament and the phenomena of the night, opens up unsuspected possibilities for co-operation between tourism stakeholders, local communities, and scientific institutions.

10.

Sites included in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, Ramsar Wetlands, World Heritage Sites, National Parks, and all those protected areas which combine exceptional landscape and natural values relying on the quality of their night sky, are called for including the protection of clear night skies as a key factor strengthening their mission in protecting nature.

All the necessary measures should be implemented to inform and to raise awareness among all the main actors

involved in protecting the night environment, be it at local, national, regional, or international level, of the contents and the objectives of the International Conference in Defence of the Quality of the Night Sky and the Right to Observe the Stars, held on the Island of La Palma.

FINAL RESOLUTION

The International Conference in Defence of the Quality of the Night Sky and the Right to Observe the Stars considers it essential to make the following public appeals:

1.

In consonance with the principles announced in this Declaration, the Conference invites the authorities of States to take appropriate measures in order to safeguard the cultural and natural heritage of Starlight, and formulate action plans to provide effective protection of night sky, particularly in areas of interest for astronomical observation, protected areas that are sensitive to the loss of natural light from the night and places of special importance related to astronomical heritage.

2.

The Conference agrees to refer the Declaration on the Defence of the Night Sky and the Right to Starlight to the Director-General of UNESCO for its acknowledgement and, if appropriate, recommendation to the Agencies and Bodies of the United Nations system as well as to the International Conventions related with the principles and objectives approached by the Declaration and other organisations directly involved, such as the IAU (International Astronomical Union)

3.

At the request of the Canary Island Government, once it has been adopted at a meeting of the Canary Islands Government Council in April 2007, the Conference decides to submit a proposal to UNESCO through the Spanish Government to declare April 20th a World Right to Observe the Stars Day. The campaign will be launched under the name "The World Night".

4.

The Conference proposes to the UNESCO-MaB Secretariat to present the final conclusions and achieved agreements at the III World Biosphere Reserves Congress, to be held in Madrid in 2008, with a view to include night sky protection, if appropriate, into the new Action Plan for Biosphere Reserves, acknowledging the important role that Biosphere Reserves can play as a network of true sustainable development laboratories.

5.

The Conference requests the five Conventions in the Biodiversity Liaison Group, to examine the outcomes of its deliberations and, if appropriate, take to their governing bodies a combined view of the role of the conventions in helping increase protection for the night sky, understanding that this action will have positive effects on the conservation and wise use of biodiversity. The Conference also recommends to the IUCN (World Conservation Union) to examine this issue at its 4th World Conservation Congress foreseen for Barcelona in late 2008.

ADDITIONAL RESOLUTION ON THE STEERING COMMITTEE AND THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE.

Having closed the Conference, and having adopted the "Declaration on the Defence of the Night Sky and the Right to Starlight", in view of the importance of the agreements reached, provisions need to be made for the future. Continuity of the work and of the cooperation already achieved is of vital importance and, to consolidate the results achieved thus far, it is appropriate and necessary to follow up and implement the principles of the Declaration and the recommendations for the Action Plan.

To this end, the following decision is adopted:

1.

To create a Steering Committee to monitor the Declaration and its Action Plan (Starlight Initiative), made up of the international agencies and institutions represented on the Conference Organisation Committee, with the addition of representatives of World Tourism Organization, European Landscape Convention, International Astronomical Union, Ramsar Convention, UNEP Convention on Migratory Species, Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Spanish National Commission for UNESCO, as well as of any initiatives and organisations related with the different subjects, competences, and disciplines that have an impact on the protection of the night sky that may be required,

once the Committee has decided to do so.

2.

The Starlight Initiative Steering Committee should ensure the dissemination, promotion, and circulation of the Declaration and its Action Plan, and its good implementation, following the recommendations of the Scientific Committee and to engage in all and any kind of activities that guarantee its continuity.

3.

The Steering Committee is charged of the dissemination and follow-up of the Starlight Conference agreements and it would take on the responsibility to present the Declaration to and disseminate among the main stakeholders, including governments, local authorities, scientific institutions, initiatives in favour of dark sky defence, and organisations in the area of environment protection and promotion of sustainable development.

4.

The Scientific Committee shall also propose drafting reports, conducting studies, campaigns, and co-operation proposals, initiatives, and actions aimed at protecting the skies and enhancing their value, particularly contributing to the fulfilment objectives outlined in the Starlight Initiative.

5.

Among the specific initiatives arisen from the Starlight Conference, which will be approached by the works to be developed by the Scientific and Steering Committees, there are:

- The establishment of a partnership with the Sustainable Energy Europe Campaign and development of a joint initiative.
- Development of a cooperation agreement between the Starlight Initiative and the World Heritage Centre through the thematic initiative "Astronomy and World Heritage", that would also include the start of international consultations aimed to develop the "StarLight Reserves" concept.
- To refer both the Declaration and the Action Plan to the European Parliament in order to disseminate its principles and, if appropriate, adopt them at the most pertinent level.
- To work jointly with the World Tourism Organization in order to promote awareness and knowledge related with dark night sky as a resource to put into value, supporting the development of new responsible destinations and tourist products based on star observation and night sky resources.
- To strengthen cooperation and mutual support with the initiatives and organisations in involved in the defence of night sky quality, particularly with IDA (International Dark Sky Association).
- To work jointly with the European Landscape Convention to implement the new dimension of night landscape within the Convention.
- To develop new ways of cooperation with organisations involved in culture promotion, in particular SEAC and Unión Latina, to put into value the cultural heritage related with the observation of the firmament.
- To work jointly with the International Commission of illumination (CIE) in order to promote the intelligent use of lighting in all exterior applications. This to be with the aim of minimising both the use of energy and the spread of obtrusive light into the natural environment, particularly that upwards into the sky.