

Looking to the Stars: The Call for Dark Sky Parks

By Ela Gulsen

As of January 15, 2020, Dr. T.K. Lawless Park in Cass County, Michigan, is one of the latest parks to have received IDA Dark Sky Park recognition, in large part thanks to Robert Parrish, Cass County Parks Board Commissioner and dark sky advocate.

Parrish is a member of the Michiana Astronomical Society and an amateur astrophotographer who can trace his fascination of the heavens back to his childhood. Parrish was largely inspired by his father, who was in the Navy. He recalled that his father “worked with a lot of Naval pilots, and the pilots used to have to navigate by the stars at night. So, he picked up different things from them and taught me what he had learned. I grew up in the age of the space race in the 1960s, so between my dad and the space race, I was hooked.” From his backyard in southwest Michigan, he could see the Milky Way arching across the sky with a telescope he had gotten for Christmas; but now, light pollution has made this impossible almost everywhere, with dark sky preserves like Lawless Park providing rare sanctuary for those who love looking up at the stars.

Gaining IDA dark sky status was not an easy feat. It was a process that took Parrish two and a half years, and a 66-page application. The park’s lighting needed to be overhauled; bright mercury vapor and halogen lights were replaced with IDA-compliant LEDs. Yet Parrish remarked that public outreach and community involvement was the majority of the work of becoming a dark sky park. Parrish hosted presentations detailing the adverse effects of light pollution in the greater Michigan-Indiana area, educating others about what they could do to help preserve dark skies.

Initially, many members of the community had misconceptions about dark-sky friendly lighting, believing that brighter lights would provide safety against crime, and that dark sky friendly lighting would be dangerous. Yet once the changes were implemented in Lawless Park, many were pleasantly surprised. The ground was well-lit and fully visible, while the sky was dark, benefitting not only park-goers but also local wildlife. Furthermore, energy-efficient LEDs

soon pay for themselves by saving money on electricity. Due to the success of Lawless Park, Cass County is considering replacing lights at other parks with cool temperature LEDs as well.

As light pollution pervades nearly every part of America, parks across the country have begun to welcome dark sky tourism. Recently, Michigan embraced dark sky tourism as part of their Pure Michigan ad campaign, airing advertisements promoting the beautiful, clear skies that can be seen across the state in eight dark sky preserves. 80% of Americans cannot see the Milky Way, and preserves allow people to once more experience the beauty of the cosmos. For Parrish, looking at the stars is a spiritual experience. “No matter your opinion, we’re all made of star stuff. And when you’re looking at the stars, you’re really looking at your origins, at humanity’s origins.”

Parrish dedicated the park’s newly-earned dark sky status as a tribute to his father’s memory. He recalls sitting outside under the stars with his father who would say, “No matter what your troubles are, sitting underneath a beautiful starry sky, you forget about them.” Thanks to Parrish, many will be able to enjoy the beauty of the dark night sky at Lawless Park.