

Cape Lookout named first International Dark Sky Park along Atlantic Coast



A dark, clear night displays the Milky Way over the Cape Lookout Lighthouse and the keeper's quarters in this undated photo. Cape Lookout National Seashore has been named an International Dark Sky Park. (Alex Gu photo)

HARKERS ISLAND — Cape Lookout National Seashore has been certified as the first International Dark Sky Park on the Atlantic Coast.

The National Park Service at Cape Lookout and the International Dark Sky Association announced Wednesday the cape has been certified as an International Dark Sky Park. The certification recognizes the exceptional quality of the night skies there and the opportunities for astronomy-based experiences for park visitors. Cape Lookout is the first Atlantic coastal Dark Sky Place in the NPS to receive this certification.

IDSA conservation director Ashley Wilson said the organization is proud to include Cape Lookout in its program.

“Not only do they serve as another exceptional National Park Service unit that understands and is fully committing to dark-sky efforts, but they also visibly demonstrate the balance between using light efficiently and coexisting with the natural, nocturnal environment with their lighting decisions,” Ms. Wilson said. “While the majority of the park’s lighting is dark-sky friendly, the demonstration is most notable with the IDA Fixture Seal of Approval fixtures using adaptive controls at the Core Sound Museum and Heritage Center.”

NPS Cape Lookout Superintendent Jeff West said this certification is “an honor for our community and recognition of the unique values that make this park a national treasure.”

“Embarking on this project helped me remember the wonder and amazement I felt gazing into the night sky as a child,” Mr. West said. “The possibilities I imagined then are still there, dwarfing life’s daily demands when put in perspective. Maybe we all need a little star gazing right now.”

Cape Lookout received the certification after a rigorous application process that took two years and required the support of partners like Crystal Coast Stargazers, Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center and the Carteret County Chamber of Commerce. It required an evaluation of the light fixtures within the park and surrounding area. In some cases, fixtures were retrofitted or replaced to meet requirements. Finally, the certification required the development of a plan to maintain outdoor lighting in the future, to protect the park’s dark skies for the benefit of the next generation of night sky enthusiasts.

Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center Executive Director Karen Amspacher said the project has been “a learning process for all of us.”

“We’re very honored to be part of bringing this new appreciation for our natural world to locals, visitors and students,” Ms. Amspacher said. “Congratulations to everyone who has worked so hard to make this a reality for Down East Carteret County, the first on the East Coast.”

Carteret County Chamber of Commerce President Tom Kies said the chamber is thrilled to be associated with the certification.

“It gives people yet another reason to come and visit the Crystal Coast,” Mr. Kies said. “What a wonderful gift it is to have an unfettered view of the universe from our little patch of paradise.”

In support of dark sky conservation and education, the NPS at Cape Lookout, in partnership with Crystal Coast Stargazers, regularly presents astronomy programs for the public to experience the night skies in eastern Carteret County and the southern Outer Banks area. The programs include presentations designed to educate on the effect of light pollution and ways to minimize it.

Crystal Coast Stargazers club coordinator David Heflin said partnering with the NPS has been “a way to give back to the park that has provided so many enjoyable hours of stargazing for our club members.”

“Now, everyone will be aware of the nighttime treasure we have here on the North Carolina coast,” Mr. Heflin said.

The International Dark Sky Places Program was founded in 2001 as a nonregulatory and voluntary program to encourage communities, parks and protected areas to preserve dark sites through effective lighting policies, environmentally responsible outdoor lighting and public education.

“Cape Lookout National Seashore now joins more than 190 places that have demonstrated robust community support for dark sky advocacy and strive to protect the night from light pollution,” the NPS said.