

**Strictly embargoed until 18:30 Monday 24 October 2011**

**Discovering the night sky: pinpointing stargazing sites for more eyes**

Communities across England will have a twinkle in their eye and get a big environmental and educational boost thanks to Dark Sky Discovery – a pioneering new national and regional partnership of astronomy and environmental organisations led by the Science and Technology Facilities Council - that has won project funding from Natural England’s Access to Nature programme.

A £176.8k grant, funded by the Big Lottery Fund and awarded through Natural England’s Access to Nature programme, will support a 2-year programme to inspire people of all ages and backgrounds to come together in their local area and enjoy the night sky in a radically new way.

Space Connections Enterprises, based in Bradford, is the nominated organisation to develop the project for the Yorkshire and Humber Region. They are working with astronomy, environmental and community organisations with the aim of involving them to identify safe and accessible ‘Dark Sky Discovery Sites’ – places in urban and rural areas where they can take part in stimulating stargazing sessions.

Today, a series of Dark Sky Discovery Sites is being unveiled in England – and also in Wales and Scotland - illustrating the range of great local spots that people can use for stargazing.

Project Leader Dan Hillier, based at the STFC’s Royal Observatory Edinburgh site, says: “In every community there is somewhere that is the best place to see the stars. Even in towns and cities, there are places such as local parks where people can enjoy the wonders of the night sky, from planets to meteor showers. This project will find ways of helping people from a whole range of different backgrounds – such as schools, community and special needs groups, to discover the universe that is just beyond their doorstep.”

The project is funding activity in nine English regions so that astronomy and environmental organisations can work with community groups to harness local dark skies for local priorities.

Participants at today's launch event at Lee Valley Regional Park include members of the Waltham Forest Blind Association. Caroline Waddon from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) who is visually impaired and has been advising the Dark Sky Discovery project, says, "Community stargazing evenings have a great buzz to them and I have been amazed by the ways in which blind and partially-sighted people can be enabled to feel part of them through activities involving rocks from space, sound and 3D models."

Following the National Launch on the 24th October, Space Connections will be holding a Yorkshire and Humber Regional Launch at the National Science Learning Centre. More details will follow in the coming weeks.

**Notes to editors**

For an up to date list of Dark Sky Discovery sites including those in your region please see the Dark Sky Discovery website: <http://www.darkskydiscovery.org.uk>

More details about Space Connections can be found here: <http://www.spaceconnections.net/>

**Images**

A selection of images together with captions and credits can be found here: <http://www.darkskydiscovery.org.uk/press-media/downloads.html>

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Contact details for each region’s lead partner can be found on the Dark Sky Discovery website: <http://www.darkskydiscovery.org.uk/>

**Further information**

**About Dark Sky Discovery**

The Dark Sky Discovery project is based on the successful Dark Sky Scotland programme which, since 2007, has been enabling thousands of people to enjoy informed, first-hand experiences of astronomy in the company of friends, family and others from their local communities. Dark Sky Scotland has involved over 100 community events in urban and rural Scotland and the training of over 800 people to run activities.

The members of the Dark Sky Discovery National Steering Group are:

* Association for Science and Discovery Centres
* British Astronomical Association
* Campaign for Dark Skies
* Federation of Astronomical Societies
* Institute of Physics
* Royal Astronomical Society
* Royal Observatory Edinburgh Visitor Centre/Science and Technology Facilities Council (lead partner)
* Society for Popular Astronomy
* Steve Owens (freelance)

The lead regional Dark Sky Discovery partners are:

* North East: Pete Edwards, Durham University
* Yorkshire & Humberside: Helen Barraclough, Space Connections
* North West: Alan Brown, STFC’s Daresbury Laboratory
* East: Hugh Jones, University of Hertfordshire:
* South West: Emma Dennis, Exmoor National Park,
* West Midlands: Tony Fox, Cannon Hill Park
* South East: Jo Lewis, STFC’s Rutherford Appleton Laboratory
* For the London and East Midlands regions there is an opportunity for a lead partner to join the DSD England project.
* Wales: Allan Trow, Dark Sky Wales
* Scotland: Dan Hillier, STFC’s Royal Observatory Edinburgh site

Dark Sky Discovery is complementary to other dark sky-based initiatives in the UK including:

* The UK Campaign for Dark Skies (CfDS) - a section of the British Astronomical Association. The CfDS aims ‘to preserve and restore the beauty of the night sky by campaigning against excessive, inefficient and irresponsible lighting’. [www.britastro.org/dark-skies](http://www.britastro.org/dark-skies)
* Dark Sky Parks and other similar designations are awarded to local areas by the International Dark Sky Association. [www.darksky.org](http://www.darksky.org)

For more information on the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, please visit [www.roe.ac.uk](http://www.roe.ac.uk)

**About Access to Nature**

1. Access to Nature has awarded a grant of £176.8k to the Dark Sky Discovery initiative.

1. Access to Nature is run by Natural England and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund’s Changing Spaces programme launched in November 2005 to help communities enjoy and improve their local environments.
2. Natural England manages this £28.75 million Lottery-funded programme on behalf of a consortium of twelve national environmental organisations comprising BTCV, British Waterways, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission, Greenspace, Groundwork UK, Land Restoration Trust, The National Trust, Natural England, RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust.
3. Through this programme, it is Natural England’s ambition to create opportunities for people from all backgrounds to have greater access to our natural environment and bring a lasting change to their awareness and understanding as well as improved links to the natural world, which many of us can take for granted.
4. Access to Nature closed to applications in May 2010 but for further information about the programme visit [www.naturalengland.org.uk/accesstonature](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/accesstonature)
5. The Big Lottery Fund is the largest of the National Lottery good cause distributors and has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK since its inception in June 2004. For further information about the Big Lottery Fund, its programmes and awards visit [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk)

**About STFC**

The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) delivers impact to the UK by enabling world class research, innovation and skills. It funds research programmes at universities as well as providing access to large experimental facilities in the IK and around the world.

Dark Sky Discovery is part of a programme of activities supported by STFC to promote public engagement with science and technology.

STFC is one of seven publicly-funded research councils.  It is an independent, non-departmental public body of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

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