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## On the Edge of Night

*Preserving the night skies of the Texas Hill Country*

by Vicki Wolf

Bill Wren recalls how fascinated he was by the night sky when he was a child. “I remember many evenings lying in the grass looking up at the stars and wondering about the world beyond my immediate surroundings.” A veteran astronomer at the McDonald Observatory, Wren is concerned that children of future generations may not be able to experience the wonder of a brilliant starry sky because of light pollution. “In the United States, three-quarters of the population live in and around major cities where they can’t see the Milky Way,” Wren said. “Naturally dark night skies are vanishing and becoming really hard to find.”

Much of the Texas Hill Country still has night skies dark enough to see the Milky Way, but satellite images of the United States at night show a massive swath of brightly glowing yellow and white dots—light pollution—from the East Coast to Central Texas. Take a closer look and you can see a vertical line running through the center of Texas along the edge of the Hill Country. East of that line is the I-35 corridor, including the bright hubs of Austin and San Antonio. But west of the line, the satellite images show it is still dark—and a group of passionate volunteers is working to keep it that way.

“We are on the edge of night,” said Ken Kattner, a business attorney and amateur astronomer. “We have to put a stake in the ground now, and try to educate people and point out that if we don’t do something now, it’s going to look like the East Coast.” Kattner, who built the Putman Mountain Observatory for viewing the stars northwest of Fredericksburg, is working with a network of Hill Country citizens to help preserve the dark nighttime skies.

Barbara Baggett is one of those citizens. She moved from Austin to Utopia four years ago. “When I moved here, I made a resolution to get an initiative going here because I love living out in the country where I don’t see lights from other houses. I like to see the sky,” she said.

Working with the volunteer-based organization *Keep Utopia Beautiful* and her counterparts at *Keep It Real-ly Beautiful*, Baggett is leading a grassroots effort supported by the Hill Country Alliance to preserve dark skies in Uvalde, Real and Bandera counties. Hill Country communities including Dripping Springs, Fredericksburg, Llano and Mason have passed outdoor lighting ordinances, which include guidelines for protecting dark skies. Six Hill Country counties (Blanco, Uvalde, Real, Bandera, Kimble and Mason) have passed resolutions supporting night sky protection efforts. Unfortunately, Hill Country counties do not have the authority to pass outdoor lighting ordinances.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is joining the movement to protect dark skies. In 2014, Enchanted Rock State Natural Area became the first state park in the Hill Country to receive an IDA *Dark-Sky Park* designation, and others are following suit. Superintendent Doug Cochran is concerned that light from surrounding areas is beginning to dim the beautiful night sky at Enchanted Rock. “We are being invaded from San Antonio and Austin. You can see light glow on the horizon. It’s coming our way.”

To keep the march of light pollution from reaching the park, Ken Kattner is leading a citizens’ effort to create a more regional Hill Country Dark-Sky Reserve with Fredericksburg, Llano and Mason as the boundary cities, and Enchanted Rock serving as the core.

Another essential component of dark-sky preservation is the participation of Hill Country electric providers. For example, Central Texas Electric Co-op (CTEC), which serves eleven counties in the region including a large area bordering Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, has adopted a dark-sky resolution and is installing dark-sky compliant outdoor lighting fixtures.

“There is more going on right now in terms of awareness and desire for dark skies in the Texas Hill Country than almost any other part of the United States,” said Dr. John Barentine, IDA program manager. “The message really is: stay tuned because the greatest results here are yet to come.”

A growing community of people who care about preserving the starry night sky are making significant progress on dark sky initiatives. But with rapid growth and development of the Hill Country, it will take everyone getting involved to protect our night skies. For information about what you can do to preserve dark skies in your area, visit [www.hillcountryalliance.org](http://www.hillcountryalliance.org).

*Vicki Wolf is a freelance writer on assignment with Hill Country Alliance.*

*Note to Editors:* This article is an overview of ongoing initiatives to preserve Hill Country night skies. The Hill Country Alliance plans to provide a series of press releases with more information on these efforts and other dark sky initiatives and activities.

*The Hill Country Alliance is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country. Visit us at [www.hillcountryalliance.org](http://www.hillcountryalliance.org).*

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Images:



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