

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

France Celebrates Naming of its First International Dark Sky Reserve



TUCSON, AZ, AND TOULOUSE, FRANCE, 19 December 2013 – The International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) announced today the designation of the first International Dark Sky Place in France. In naming the Pic du Midi International Dark Sky Reserve (IDSR), IDA is pleased to recognize the immense local efforts to preserve and protect the exceptionally dark night skies over the Pyrénées Mountains.

“In creating the Reserve, the Pic du Midi team has not only protected a vanishing resource, they have made it better than it was,” said IDA Executive Director Bob Parks. “We commend and celebrate their exceptional efforts.”

The new Dark Sky Reserve will be known in France as Réserve Internationale de Ciel Étoilé du Pic du Midi. It is located in a region that currently draws 1.5 million visitors per year. Consisting of 1,202 square miles (3,112 km²) of public and private lands, it encompasses a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Pyrénées-Mont Perdu) and a French national park (Pyrénées National Park). It is the second-largest International Dark Sky Reserve in the world after Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve in New Zealand.

Pic du Midi Observatory

The efforts leading to today’s designation began in the 1990s when Europe nearly lost one its premiere astronomical research facilities, the Pic du Midi Observatory. As government budget cuts threatened permanent closure, Observatory supporters secured its renaissance through a “beautiful alliance between science and tourism,” according to Daniel Soucaze des Soucaze, Executive Director of Pic du Midi. He said the International Dark Sky Reserve designation represents an “important milestone” in the history of the Observatory, and believes IDA’s recognition coupled with the dedicated support of local communities greatly enhances the Observatory’s long-term prospects.

Achieving this designation “is of utmost importance for the future of astronomy, both professional and amateur,” said Hubert Reeves, Québécois astrophysicist and Director of Research at the French National Centre for Scientific Research.

Energy Savings, Tourism, and Research

The motivations driving the four-year effort culminating in today’s announcement expanded well beyond aesthetic and scientific considerations. According to French Senator François Fortassin, the “first aim” of the project was to minimize light pollution around Pic du Midi Observatory, but it soon became apparent there was much more to be gained.

As part of the efforts to achieve IDA recognition, a total of 251 communities adopted a comprehensive outdoor lighting management plan (LMP) that included retrofits and replacements of existing lighting fixtures, and the use of new lighting technologies. By 2013, early results showed the LMP could effectively reduce light pollution in the region by 85 percent and energy usage by 38 percent, all while maintaining safe lighting levels for residents and visitors.

The new lighting plan continues to provide “significant energy savings and offer economic development opportunities in the Hautes-Pyrénées area,” said Christian Poncet, Regional Representative of the French power company Électricité de France.

The region is capitalizing on the IDA designation as a means of furthering research into land use policy and practices, tourism business models, and resources sustainability at the nearby University of Pau and Pays de l’Adour. A team has been designated by the University to manage the Pic du Midi IDSR project and to install and maintain scientific instruments in the Pic du Midi region to monitor the quality of the night sky in the future.

Officials at Pic du Midi have even grander aspirations for preserving dark skies in the Pyrénées. In coming years, they plan to work with their Spanish counterparts to expand the protected territory into Spain, making for the first IDA Dark Sky Reserve spanning two nations.

Images

Pic du Midi RICE Logo (French)

<http://bit.ly/1keC0TS>



Photographing the Milky Way near the village of Aulon, France (Credit: Nicolas Bourgeois / Pic du Midi)

<http://bit.ly/1keBu8k>



Star trails over Pic du Midi Observatory (Credit: Paul Compère / Pic du Midi)

<http://bit.ly/1keApxq>



Video: “*Timelapse at the Pic du Midi Observatory*” (credit: Romain Montaigut, romain-montaigut.fr)

<http://vimeo.com/76724488>

About the IDA Dark Sky Places Program

IDA established the International Dark Sky Places conservation program in 2001 to recognize excellent stewardship of the night sky. Designations are based on stringent outdoor lighting standards and innovative community outreach. Since the program began, five communities, thirteen parks and five reserves have received International Dark Sky designations. For more information about the International Dark Sky Places Program, visit <http://darksky.org/night-sky-conservation/34-ida/about-ida/142-idsplaces>.

About IDA

The International Dark Sky Association, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, advocates for the protection of the nighttime environment and dark night skies by educating the policymakers and the public on the subject of night sky conservation and promoting

environmentally responsible outdoor lighting. More information about IDA and its mission may be found at <http://www.darksky.org>

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