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In Vermont, a dim view of skiers' night lights: [FINAL Edition]

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Abstract (summary)

Although Vermont astronomers weren't able to stop the lights at Stowe - one of two Vermont ski resorts using lights - they did persuade state officials to begin drafting new outdoor-lighting regulations.

In Stowe, managers of Mount Mansfield Resort say trail lights are part of what lure vacationers - and their dollars - to Vermont.

The lights will produce 4,680,000 lumens - more than 2 1/2 times the brightness of all Stowe's street lights - and give skiers more hours on the slopes each night.

Full Text

SKI RESORTS VS. ENVIRONMENTALISTS;See sidebar:Activists, resorts clash over water

STOWE, Vt. - Near twilight Saturday, the slopes of Vermont's highest peak, Mount Mansfield, will be set aglow by 130 newly installed floodlights.

The lights will produce 4,680,000 lumens - more than 2 1/2 times the brightness of all Stowe's street lights - and give skiers more hours on the slopes each night.

But the installation also will alter Vermont's night sky. For up to 15 miles, the light will either block out or dim the view of the stars.

That has some sky-viewers and environmentalists looking for ways to pull the plug.

``For as long as humans have walked upright, the night sky has been an inspiration," says Joy Fagan, an amateur astronomer who lives nearby. ``We're going to give all that up to make a few bucks. ... We're robbing our children."

The battle in Vermont is the latest round in a grass-roots environmental crusade growing across the country: the effort to fight the ``light pollution" of outdoor lighting.

``Dark-sky proponents," including astronomers, scientists and environmentalists, say stars have been a natural resource for travelers and poets for centuries. Now, they warn, three-fourths of Americans never even see a truly starry sky.

Says David Crawford, an astronomer at Arizona's Kitt Peak Observatory: ``A priceless part of our human heritage is fading."

Activists are beginning to organize. The first national conference on light pollution was held last month at Harvard University . The International Dark Sky Association now boasts more than 1,200 members in 46 countries. The group's motto: `` Save the stars."

Although Vermont astronomers weren't able to stop the lights at Stowe - one of two Vermont ski resorts using lights - they did persuade state officials to begin drafting new outdoor-lighting regulations.

Activists say the impact of outdoor lighting can be reduced by using high- pressure sodium lamps - which cause less glare than mercury-vapor white lights - and by using shields to direct light downward.

`` This is about controlling wasted light. In this country, we spend about \$1.2 billion a year shining light into outer space," says Fred Schaaf, a New Jersey author and Dark Sky proponent.

The Dark Sky movement has won victories across the country.

- In Arizona, almost every city and county has ordinances regulating outdoor lights. Some feared that telescopes at several important research observatories would become useless if sky glow increased.
- San Diego, Glendale and other southern California cities have adopted strict controls. Los Angeles is replacing its old street lights with shielded models.
- Maine has passed a law requiring shielded lights on highways and state- owned properties.
- Indiana astronomers successfully sued to get some lights turned off.

In Stowe, managers of Mount Mansfield Resort say trail lights are part of what lure vacationers - and their dollars - to Vermont.

`` Our customers are asking for night skiing," says company president Gary Kiedaisch. `` They travel to get here, and they're looking for something more to do at night than go to a bar or a dance hall."

Kiedaisch says the company did try to reduce light pollution: Lamp shields are in place, and the resort will turn off lights by 11 p.m.

But Mount Mansfield could face another battle over the lights. Because the resort is on parkland leased from the state, a license is required to illuminate the trails. State officials have promised a study before the license is renewed in 1995.

CUTLINE:BLINDED BY THE LIGHTS: Amateur astronomer Joy Fagan fears floodlights on ski slopes will impede her vision of the stars.

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