

Dark Sky Sanctuary status will put Great Barrier Island on international stage

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Great Barrier Island residents say they believe their clear views of the night skies are worthy of international sanctuary status. Photo/File

Great Barrier Island residents and businesses are looking to the heavens for a bright future.

The island has applied to be declared an International Dark Sky Sanctuary.

A decision is expected within a few weeks, encouraging accommodation providers to set-up telescopes in hopes of attracting star-gazing "astro-tourists" from around the world.

Being off-grid and with almost zero outdoor lighting, the island avoids the excess light pollution blamed for obliterating night-sky displays across the developed world.

Intense starry vistas have captivated generations of visitors to the island, 90 kilometres north-east of Auckland. Barrier residents decided to turn this long-standing aesthetic asset into a major tourist drawcard after "space fever" hit the island last year.



The night sky is so bright at remote Mabey Beach that visitors claim they can read a newspaper by starlight. Photo/Paul Charman

Last September, the island's Awana Rural Women Group hosted a conference called, "Is There Anybody Out There", which examined the possibility of life on other planets.

Speakers including the Pope's astronomer and director of the Vatican Observatory, Brother Guy Consolmagno and Weta Digital's creative arts director, Gino Acevedo.

Following the event, at which it was pointed out Barrier residents see 10 times more stars than folk living in Auckland City, an island astronomy group was formed.

BETTER THAN TEKAPO

The astronomy group attracted 90 people, meaning 10 per cent of the island's 950 residents have now officially become star-gazers.

An application by the Great Barrier Local Board for international status as a "Dark Sky Sanctuary" was supported by Auckland Council and the Auckland Astronomical Society - and sent to the Arizona-based International Dark-Sky Association (IDA).

It could, one resident said, potentially lead to status exceeding that of the Aoraki Dark-Sky Reserve, in the Mackenzie Basin, which draws tens of thousands of international visitors annually.

"Dark-sky reserves", such as at Lake Tekapo, are far more numerous than "dark-sky sanctuaries". Sanctuary status was reserved for the most isolated, fragile and dark locations.

Barrier residents said sanctuary status would bring the island to the notice of hundreds of thousands astro-photography enthusiasts worldwide.

Gendie and Richard Somerville-Ryan and Nalayini and Gareth Davies prepared and submitted the application to the IDA, but Gendie Somerville-Ryan declined to comment.

She said the IDA's deliberations would be sub judice until the decision was announced in early June.

However, hospitality providers on the island say astro-tourism is an idea whose time has come. Although hoping for sanctuary status, they said night-sky tourism would, in any event, now be at the core of their promotions.

PERFECT NICHE

Destination Great Barrier Island (DGBI) chairwoman Reverend Caroline Leys said night-sky tourism was a perfect niche market for the island to develop.



Destination Great Barrier Island (DGBI) chairwoman Reverend Caroline Leys and Orama Oasis leadership team member Paul McGlashan. Photo/Paul Charman

It would boost tourist trade in the island's shoulder seasons, the periods leading-up to and following the Christmas holidays, she said.

Hospitality providers already had their hands full during peak season; accommodation tended to be booked out and roads barely cope with traffic.

"But in the peak holiday season you don't get a good view of the night sky until about 10pm, anyway," Lees said.

"Before and after daylight saving [September 25 to April 2], we have a dark skies from about 6.30pm.

"Getting an earlier view of the stars has many advantages, not least giving the opportunity to involve children."

Lees said many operators were over-worked during the peak season but accommodation was often under-used during shoulder seasons.

"Night-sky tourism has the potential to counteract that. It could provide additional roles for drivers, presenters, guides and so forth; maybe allowing young people raised on the island to return to live and work."

She said Drama Oasis, with which she has had a long association, would recruit astronomy graduates to explain the night sky to visitors.

"A couple of people could live here and work as volunteers; we'll offer them scholarships at the end of their time."

STARRY NIGHTS

Medlands Beach Lodge owner Mark Durling said there was so little residual light, stars seen from the barrier could be "so bright it's truly incredible".



Auckland gallery owner Sally Souness and Medlands Beach Lodge owner Mark Durling.
Photo/Paul Charman

"I get overseas people that come here, folk who seldom get to see the stars in their home countries," says Durling. "They just lie on the deck and count the satellites as they track across the sky."

"Dark-skies tourism has been part of the island unofficially for many years, but if we receive official status, it will only be more so."

"Becoming a dark-skies sanctuary will make the experience available to so many more people, including many who wouldn't have known that the Barrier even exists."

Medlands resident and Auckland art gallery owner Sally Souness said it was sometimes like "seeing a million lights up there".

"It's as if you've just turned on the biggest chandelier you could ever see," Souness said.

She was particularly enjoying the island's new astronomy club.

"It's a real buzz for adults but even better to see the effect of this learning on the island's children."

GLENFERN SANCTUARY

At Auckland's newest regional park, the Glenfern Sanctuary, workers and residents were also backing the dark-sky bid. Glenfern hosted paying guests in a colonial house and a colonial cottage.



Glenfern volunteers Joel and Sylvia Bouzaid with their children Tobias, 13, Riana, 6, and Kealan, 9. Photo/Paul Charman

Volunteer Joel Bouzaid, whose father, the late champion yachtsman Tony Bouzaid, set up the sanctuary, said he'd never seen guests so happy as when surveying the night sky with binoculars.

"We used to offer them opportunity to do this from a spa pool, but got sick of stoking it for two days to get the water hot."

Bouzaid said the best view of the heavens was from Sunset Rock "where you're just wrapped around by stars from skyline to skyline".

He had seen excellent views of the Milky Way while living in Germany and travelling in the United States "but this place provides the best views of I've seen".

One way to enjoy the starry vistas at Glenfern was to volunteer there, he said. The sanctuary always needed volunteers with energy, who were willing to trap rats and perform a wide range of other duties.

THREE GENERATIONS

North Shore's Mike and Glen Waterhouse met at the former farmhouse which is now the focal point of the Glenfern Sanctuary, enjoying many walks under the starry skies.

They have been returning to the Barrier for holidays ever since, and during the 1980s built a holiday home near Mabey Beach, where their daughters, Emma and Kate, were introduced to the stars.



Emma Waterhouse, Kate Waterhouse and their parents Mike and Glen Waterhouse. At front with telescope is Kate's daughter Evie Waterhouse-MacMahon. Photo/Paul Charman

"The big thing at night was simply to take rugs to the sand hills, lie on them and look up at the stars," says Kate Waterhouse.

"There were always a lot of satellites tracking from one side of the sky to the other, and now my children get to experience the same sense of wonderment and awe here."

Emma Waterhouse was a trustee of the Glenfern Sanctuary Trust and Kate Waterhouse was a member of the Great Barrier Island Environmental Trust.

"We see astro-tourism as an opportunity to grow tourist revenue which will be vital to restoring the island's ecology," Emma Waterhouse says.

"The predator fence built to protect Glenfern and the Kotuku Peninsula shows what is possible. We have ground-nesting seabirds becoming established, and a healthy reptile population. Without rats and other predators the entire island could be teeming with wildlife but it will take money and community support to achieve this kind of transformation."

BARRIER ON A ROLL

Many of the world's dark-skies reserves were located in Canada, a fact not lost on Chris and Teara Walker, who run the luxurious Mount St Paul Estate at Medlands.



Chris and Teara Walker at Mount St Paul Estate. Photo/Paul Charman

The couple previously enjoyed the intense starry skies of the Canadian Arctic, where they lived before emigrating to New Zealand.

"The night sky is just one aspect of the near-pristine environment you get to enjoy here, Chris said.

"And this is one of the big reasons we're seeing a lot of people make the move to the Barrier.

"Now that we have good internet service there's a growing number of IT specialists moving in to live and work. But the other main drawcards would be cheap housing and zero commuting issues."

Teara Walker said the community was a close one, where neighbours can easily become friends.

** Paul Charman's trip to the Barrier was supported by Sealink, Glenfern Sanctuary, Orama Oasis, Mount St Paul's Estate and Holden NZ Ltd*

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Footnote:

Following an application to the Arizona-based International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) for international status as a "Dark Sky Sanctuary", supported by Auckland Council and the Auckland Astronomical Society a positive decision was announced in early June.

On the 19 August a celebration was held on Great Barrier Island attended by Auckland Mayor Phil Goff and Local MP Nikki Kaye. The theme was stars and there were starry capes, hats, leggings, dresses and jackets. Afternoon tea featured a star covered cake and muffins. "Astronz" and the "AAS" (Auckland Astronomical Society) had telescopes on display and the "Universe To-Go on" sale to get people geared up and ready for the evening stargazing activities. Stardome setup a Pipehenge next to the AAS solar telescope for some daytime astronomy.

