



How to get
International Dark
Sky Place
Certified



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Getting Started

If you're interested in what it takes to achieve an International Dark Sky Place (IDSP) certification, you're in the right place. When you embark on the IDSP certification process, expect a two to five-year timeline from your initial point of inquiry with DarkSky International to the time your place becomes certified.

Your first step is to do your homework by deciding what dark sky certification type is best for your location. You will need to know details about land management, sky quality, and size criteria for International Dark Sky Place certifications. Essentially, everyone's goal should be to protect the location's night skies, but depending on where you are and which place you're looking at - you will generally have to fall within one of the certification categories. Research the application process here: [How to Become an International Dark Sky Place](#)

DarkSky International has five types of certifications for both communities and populated areas, as well as parks and protected areas:

1. [International Dark Sky Community Guidelines](#)
2. [International Dark Sky Reserve Guidelines](#)
3. [International Dark Sky Parks Guidelines](#)
4. [International Dark Sky Sanctuary Guidelines](#)
5. [Urban Night Sky Places Guidelines](#)

We recommend you use the [simple flow chart](#) DarkSky International created to help determine which certification is best for your community or region.

Once you have a certification in mind, do your research and look at the application process at DarkSky International's website. The guidelines presented and what follows here will provide you with both a detailed and holistic view of what it takes to become an International Dark Sky Place.

These guidelines are numbered into steps, and generally follow the order in which to proceed, however each location is unique and certain aspects will be easier than others, so use your judgment in determining what path is best for your specific location. Oftentimes the process is like untying a knot, and you will need to work on different angles at different times, then repeat again and again until the knot unravels. If you find yourself running into strong resistance, oftentimes it is best to change direction and work on another aspect of the certification that is more productive until the challenge more easily resolves. Achieving an International Dark Sky Place certification is a challenging process, but if you take one step at a time and work on

building relationships with your community, you will make great progress and reach your certification goals and beyond.

Key Points:

- Research the application process
 - [How to Become an International Dark Sky Place](#)
- Choose your type of place
 - [Simple flow chart](#)
- Review the applicable guidelines
 - [International Dark Sky Community Guidelines](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Reserve Guidelines](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Parks Guidelines](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Sanctuary Guidelines](#)
 - [Urban Night Sky Places Guidelines](#)
- Expect a 2-5 year timeline to completion

1. Convene a Coalition for the Stars

Just know, even the best dark sky advocates can't do this alone. You need a coalition for the stars; a team of stakeholders and like-minded people that are willing to collaborate to preserve the night sky now, and into the future.

The future is key, because a dark sky certification is meant for the long-term. So with the realization that your dark sky champions now may change positions, or move away, it's best to go into the formation of a coalition with the understanding and need for representation from organizations and stakeholders that will be able to support dark sky efforts into the future.

Although not a requirement, many coalitions come up with a name and start an email list of supporters. This can help spread the word about your cause and help your effort build support.

Oftentimes, a Memorandum of Understanding is a great tool to solidify dark sky partners, roles, and responsibilities before beginning the groundwork of certification.

Once you feel confident that you have a team of supporters that can work through the certification process, you can formally begin by opening a file with IDA for a fee of \$250.

Key Points:

- Form a coalition of supporters and volunteers
- Name your group and start an email list
- Use MOU's and Letters / Pledges of Support when needed
- Open a file with DarkSky International
 - [Inquiry Form](#)

- Pay \$250 fee

2. Conduct a Sky Brightness Measurement Program

A sky brightness measurement program must be established in order to meet the minimum sky quality standard for your IDSP certification, and to follow the evolution of light pollution and to ensure night sky quality does not degrade over time. A sky brightness measurement program should include a sky quality meter survey and also include photographic evidence of night sky quality. Applicants should discuss their measurement protocol with the International Dark Sky Places Program Manager.

Find the Best Measurement Locations

You can approach the sky quality meter survey by first looking at a map of your proposed dark sky place. A comprehensive survey will represent the darkest, brightest, and most accessible areas for visitors; and represent data throughout the seasons. Identify locations throughout your area that are conducive for taking routine measurements. Measurements must be distributed over a sufficiently long enough period of time in order to average out fluctuations over timescales ranging from nights to seasons in length. Scout out locations prior to starting your survey so that you can choose sites without any nearby artificial light sources and are relatively easy to get to so that other volunteers can help with the survey.

Having volunteers to help conduct the survey is not only helpful when covering a large area, but is also a great way to engage community members in the project! You want to make it as easy as possible and fun for volunteers to participate.

Dark Sky Tools and Resources

DarkSky International has a number of resources to help you record data in the field, track data throughout the course of a year, and also provides guidance on [How to Conduct a Night Sky Quality Survey](#).

Taking Measurements

For the sky quality meter survey, it's recommended you use the Unihedron Sky Quality Meter-Lens (SQM-L) to start taking scientific-quality measurements of sky brightness. This user-friendly tool is reasonably priced at \$155 U.S. dollars and there are also some local organizations that are able to lend this equipment out¹. You can take a measurement by simply holding the instrument up above you, pointing the photometer at the zenith, and clicking the button. The SQM-L will read you the measurement in astronomer units (magnitudes per square arcsecond); the darker the sky is, the higher the number you will get (the range is approximately 7 to 23 mpsas). You will likely need several of these meters - the number of which depends on how large your proposed dark sky place is, and how many volunteers are helping you.

To achieve the most accurate data, be sure to avoid ambient light, cloudy and snowy conditions, and moonlit nights. Also avoid twilight and ensure you are recording data when the sun is 18°

below the horizon. A good source of information for times of the end and beginning of astronomical twilight at your location on any given night can be found [here](#).

Data Management

Advocates are encouraged to use IDA's standardized spreadsheet when taking [measurements out in the field](#) or [compiling measurements](#) taken throughout the course of a year. Directions for access and edits are provided at the top of each spreadsheet.

Dark Sky Photography

Photographic evidence of the night sky is most important to “capture the dark,” that is, to accurately portray the darkness of your IDSP. In certain IDSPs, panoramic nighttime photography of the horizon must be included in order to substantiate the number and extent of light domes visible from the site. Photos of the milky way/clear night skies and ways in which people can enjoy the night sky in your IDSP are always great to include in your application as well.

Key Points:

- Find the Best Sky Quality Measurement Locations
- Recruit Volunteers
- Acquire Sky Quality Meters [Unihedron SQM-L](#)
 - Handheld and Continuous loggers
- Best Practices for taking Measurements - [How to Conduct a Night Sky Quality Survey](#).
- Astronomical twilight at your location on any given night can be found [here](#).
- Recording [measurements out in the field](#) and [compiling measurements](#)
- Include photographic evidence

3. Engage the Community with Dark-Sky Education & Outreach

Perhaps the most important part of your dark sky initiative will be engaging the public in dark-sky education and outreach. In most cases, especially when working to establish an International Dark Sky Community, or International Dark Sky Reserve, you will need extensive community buy-in in order to achieve dark sky certification status.

So the first step in this phase is to educate yourself on the benefits of dark skies so that you can help spread the word and educate others about the importance of dark skies. Remember, mitigating light pollution not only allows us to experience the true grandeur of a naturally dark sky, but also improves public health and safety, protects wildlife and the natural environment, conserves energy, and benefits the economy.

Next, be sure to recruit volunteers to become community champions that are willing to help with dark sky education and outreach in their community to garner support and buy-in for your dark sky initiative.

Design a Plan to Fit Your Community

Every community differs in how it operates, the values it holds, and the nuances that make each one so unique. Work with your coalition and community champions to develop a strategic dark sky education and outreach plan that best suits your community or region. Education and outreach can look like a lot of things; a social media campaign demonstrating how people can help protect the night, a community stargazing event, tabling at an existing community event, incorporating dark skies and astronomy into school curricula, or working with local hardware stores to educate consumers about proper dark sky bulbs and fixtures. The sky's the limit! Remember to build off of established campaigns like International Dark Sky Week and occurring celestial events to further heighten your outreach efforts. Don't be afraid to get creative. Think of innovative partnerships that might take your outreach to a new level.

Engage Community Groups and Leaders

Last, but definitely not least, engage groups of interest and community officials: astronomy, conservation, and tourism groups, local businesses, electric companies, local homeowners and property owners associations, chambers of commerce, municipalities, county government, and land management agencies. In dealing with commercial businesses, it's important to personally communicate to owners or managers how shielded lighting can offer better illumination for customers to navigate outside areas, especially parking lots, while at the same time reducing their power bills. For electrical contractors, hardware stores, and home improvement centers, provide a vendor list for dark sky friendly fixtures.

From what you've read, it's obvious that a great deal of personal, positive contact with the general public, businesses and government officials is the key to success. And expect it to take some time to win them over. If you're lucky to be in an environmentally aware community, then the time might be much shorter.

Key Points:

- Educate yourself – become an expert
 - [Find resources here](#)
- Recruit fellow community champions
- Design a Plan to Fit Your Community
- Develop an outreach and education plan
 - At least 4 events per year
 - Work with local schools
 - Collect email lists
 - Engage Community Groups and Leaders
 - Types of groups

- Astronomy, conservation, and tourism groups, local businesses, electric companies, local homeowners and property owners associations, chambers of commerce, municipalities, county government, and land management agencies.
- For electrical contractors, hardware stores, and home improvement centers, provide a vendor list for dark sky friendly fixtures.

4. Develop a Lighting Management Plan (LMP)

The provision of a Lighting Management Plan (LMP), and its continued implementation, is an essential requirement of DarkSky International when considering the initial merits of an application for IDSP Certification. A quality comprehensive LMP must be adopted by the agency administering the proposed IDSP or by a sufficient number of communities within the region depending on the IDSP certification you're seeking. The parameters of LMP adoption (percentage/time) vary per IDSP as well, so be sure to consult your IDSP guidelines. The minimum standards to be included in the LMP are denoted by DarkSky International in the certification guidelines. Standards entail shielding, color temperature, adaptive controls, lumens per net acre caps, and other requirements that adhere to dark sky principles in an effort to mitigate light pollution.

The Goal of a Lighting Management Plan

The principal goal of the LMP is to ensure that the already naturally dark sky in this region is not only protected, but also further enhanced, through the adoption of responsible lighting practices. The LMP is intended to guide municipalities, counties, and/or public and private entities with the selection, placement, installation, and operation of all new and replacement lighting in the IDSP by providing minimum dark sky standards. However, the LMP should also strike a balance between providing minimum requirements while being flexible enough to provide a framework and guidance for local governments to construct their own dark sky ordinance that will meet the requirements of the LMP. Once a suitable dark sky ordinance is adopted, this translates into the adoption of the LMP, thus meeting DarkSky International criteria.

Follow the Example of Others

To develop your LMP, you can look for a similar-sized International Dark Sky Place and find their application on DarkSky.org. From here, you can see their specific LMP and use that as a template to work off of for your IDSP. However, be sure to consider the character of your community, its challenges, opportunities, and needs as you develop the LMP. It should address areas of attention that may be unique to your area, such as ski resorts, extensive agricultural lands, or commercial greenhouse development. Make sure to include additional insight from coalition members or stakeholders as you draft the LMP; additional perspective is useful as this document will likely undergo several revisions. It's especially beneficial to be working with applicable municipalities or county government employees that can help you through certain challenges that might arise - therefore helping you navigate the language you should use within the document to receive a more positive response upon your proposal.

Once you're close, send the LMP to the DarkSky International Program Manager for review. After you have received their unofficial but worthy stamp of approval, it's now time to work with the local government to adopt outdoor lighting ordinances that will adhere to the LMP.

Familiarize yourself with the current land use code and lighting ordinance to come up with your "ask" or items within the ordinance needing to be revised to adhere to the LMP. Engage government staff as much as possible and find champions in local government to help you through the amendment and adoption process.

Be prepared to attend town council and planning commission meetings which can be long, and likely, repeat visits will be necessary. This may be the most arduous part of the entire process, but have patience and don't lose hope!

When there has finally been an amendment or new ordinance drafted, have the DarkSky International Program Manager check the ordinance for compliance before final approval as it's easier to make changes before it is adopted.

Enforcement:

It is best to lead by example and inform people so they can make the best choices. The primary modes of enforcement are through education and building codes. New lighting will be regulated through dark sky building codes. If lighting is a problem, educational material will be available for residents and visitors to learn about responsible lighting. For major offenses, lighting can be considered a nuisance and be treated as a nuisance violation.

Also, some places have lighting improvement programs where costs of new lighting is offset by donations from dark sky supporters.

Dark Sky Compliant Lighting:

There are many dark sky compliant lighting options available online and at big chain stores like Lowes and Home Depot. You may need to work with your local hardware store on finding suitable options. Many times they have to buy their stock from a particular distributor so their options may be limited, but with persistence the right options can be identified.

Streetlights:

Streetlights are generally managed and sometimes owned by the electric utility company. Dark sky compliant street lighting is readily available. It is best practice to work with the community government or land managing agency to have street lighting brought up to compliance.

Streetlights are replaced approximately every 10-15 years, so look for the next replacement to apply dark sky principles. Just like with hardware stores, electric companies usually have a contract with a specific distributor who may have limited options. Persistence pays off in finding the best choices.

Other Lighting Projects:

The IDSP application requires examples of Lighting Demonstration Projects that serve as examples of either newly installed or retrofitted lighting projects that adhere to the adopted Lighting Management Plan. Be alert for any new developments that may impact the area's dark skies. Engage in the development process as soon as possible. Usually there are comment periods and planning department meetings before a board vote.

Key Points:

- Goal of the LMP is to regulate artificial light at night
- Consult IDSP guidelines for particular type of Place
 - [International Dark Sky Community Guidelines](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Reserve Guidelines](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Parks Guidelines](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Sanctuary Guidelines](#)
 - [Urban Night Sky Places Guidelines](#)
- Include regulations on shielding, color temperature, unshielded lighting limits, lumen caps, new public lighting, adaptive controls, lighted signs, athletic fields, amortization period, enforcement, temporary lighting, visitor lighting, etc.
- Each area is unique and needs customized areas of attention
- Follow examples of others here: [International Dark Sky Places](#)
- Include stakeholders in the process
- Find government champions to navigate the bureaucratic process
- Check with DarkSky Colorado / DarkSky International for completion checklist
- Attend local government meetings (town hall)
 - Get ordinance reading on the agenda
 - Will likely take a few readings before being adopted
 - Be prepared to provide comment as subject matter expert
- Enforcement
 - Education
 - Building Codes
 - Nuisance violations
- Where to find Dark Sky compliant Lighting
- Address opportunities for Lighting Demonstration Projects

5: Set up a Policy Planning Framework

Engage policymakers and land managers to create a dark sky policy framework for the lighting management plan and ordinance.

Engage Policymakers:

Engage policymakers and land managers by setting up individual meetings or getting on agendas for town council and planning commission meetings. Create a general presentation

about your dark sky initiative that has the specifics about your project, but that you can alter as need be depending on the main message or take away you want to leave with your audience. Policymakers want to know initiatives like this have community support, so intend on gathering letters of support or obtaining pledges from community citizens and local business owners.

Strategic and Master Plans:

Get involved in the planning process through Master and Strategic Plans. Most Strategic and Master Plans are updated every 5-20 years, so getting dark skies into the plan can be a crucial step in the certification process. To do this, find out when the current governing Strategic or Master Plan was created and see if it can be amended or find out when the next update will be and get involved in the commenting.

Key Points:

- Research the current lighting policy, master plans, and strategic plans.
- Most Strategic and Master Plans are updated every 5-20 years.
- Create a general presentation about your dark sky initiative.
- Gather letters of support or obtain pledges from community citizens and local business owners.
- Conduct a survey.
- Meet with policymakers
- Get on agendas for town council and planning commission meetings.
- Ask the governing body to provide a Letter of Support for the dark sky initiative.
- Daft a Dark Sky Week or Dark Sky Month Proclamation.
- The goal of the policy framework is to create a sustainable foundation for the dark sky Lighting Management Plan (LMP).

6. Inventory Outdoor Lighting

A required step in becoming certified is taking inventory of all public lighting. A lighting inventory is a formal audit of outdoor lighting within your proposed IDSP. The parameters vary slightly depending on which certification type you are trying to achieve, so make sure to consult the DarkSky International Guidelines for your type of IDSP.

Essentially, the lighting inventory gathers data—types of fixtures, lumens/watts, color temperature, shielding, adaptive controls, and more—on public lighting in the IDSP. It is used to determine rates of compliance with the Lighting Management Plan (next section) and to identify lighting equipment in need of rehabilitation through retrofitting or replacement. The inventory is a living database and is tracked and updated as outdoor lighting is updated. This is another big component of the application process that will need more hands on deck - another great volunteer opportunity to further engage and educate interested citizens.

Key Points:

- Consult IDSP guidelines for your type of Place (Guidelines found in 0: Getting Started)
- Find a data template
- Gather data
 - [Opple Light Master III](#) light meter for color temperature readings (CCT)
- Keep inventory updated as lighting is changed
- Recruit Volunteers

7. Draft the Application:

Once all the steps are complete, it is time to gather all the qualifying information into one application packet that DarkSky International will review to determine if all the steps have been completed. See the DarkSky International [Application flowchart here](#) for more information and a timeline.

A final Letter of Support from an IDA member or Chapter is needed, as well as a Letter of Support from the municipality or other land managing agency.

DarkSky International provides "checklists" to ensure you have everything you need in your application. See the full list of checklists at the following link:

<https://www.darksky.org/our-work/conservation/idsp/become-a-dark-sky-place/>

Once everything is in order, send the application to DarkSky for review.

Key Points:

- Compose the application
 - Follow the DarkSky International [Application flowchart here](#)
 - Gather letters of support
 - Follow past examples for a template
 - Use Checklists:
 - [International Dark Sky Community Checklist](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Reserve Checklist](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Park Checklist](#)
 - [International Dark Sky Sanctuary Checklist](#)
 - [Urban Night Sky Places Checklist](#)
- Send to DarkSky for review
- Expect a few revisions

Post Certification:

Congratulations, your location has been designated as an International Dark Sky Place! Now is the time to put up signs announcing your accomplishment. Though most of the heavy lifting has been accomplished in completing the application, Dark sky advocacy does not end at certification. Steps need to be taken each year to keep the certification going.

Key Points:

- Put up signs to announce certification in your location
- Identify new threats to the night sky
- Continue Outreach
- Continue SQM measurements
- Monitor compliance with LMP
- Annual report to IDA
 - Report on outreach, new building projects, and new collaborations
- Report on updates to lighting inventory
 - 5 year public lighting
 - 10 years all lighting
- Report SQM measurements