

EVERY STAR COUNTS, LIGHT MATTERS

Cultural Astronomy and Light Pollution

Protecting the night sky as a cultural, spiritual and educational resource

Why the Night Sky Matters—Culturally and Spiritually

For tens of thousands of years, the stars have shaped human culture. The night sky has served as a calendar, compass, classroom, and canvas for stories passed through generations. From ancient stone observatories to oral traditions, the stars connect people to place, time, ancestry and meaning.

In Australia, the world's longest continuing cultures—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—hold sophisticated astronomical knowledge embedded in the land and sky. Darkness is not emptiness, it is presence. Light pollution erodes this connection.

What Is Cultural Astronomy?

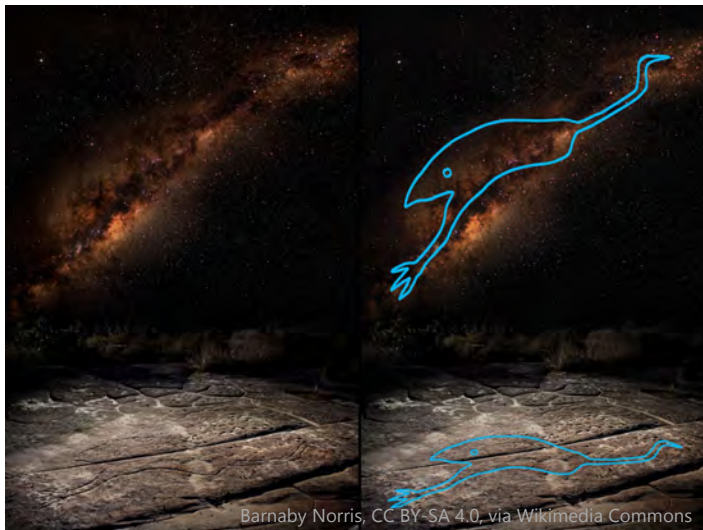
Cultural astronomy explores how societies understand and interpret the sky. It includes:

- Indigenous sky lore and seasonal indicators
- Ceremonial and sacred relationships with stars, planets, the moon, and dark spaces
- Built structures and landscapes aligned with celestial movements
- Contemporary cultural and scientific engagement with the cosmos

In many Aboriginal cultures, the Emu in the Sky is a dark shape formed by dust lanes within the Milky Way, not by the stars themselves. It appears seasonally and signals important cultural activities like emu egg collection. In light-polluted areas, the Emu disappears, along with the stories and ecological knowledge it carries.

Efforts to protect and restore dark skies around cultural sites allow this knowledge to remain visible, shared, and relevant.

When we flood the sky with artificial light, we dim more than just the stars—we erase access to shared cultural heritage.



Emu in the Sky constellation with a tracing of the Rock Engraving superimposed

Light Pollution as Cultural Erosion

ARTIFICIAL LIGHT AT NIGHT:

- Obscures traditional constellations, navigation stars, and dark sky features (e.g. the Emu in the Sky)
- Reduces opportunities for cultural storytelling and intergenerational learning
- Diminishes the ability to pass on oral knowledge and seasonal cues
- Disrespects culturally significant dark places by over-lighting landscapes

The loss of darkness is also the loss of cultural identity for many communities.

Protecting Sky Culture

CULTURAL NIGHT SKY HERITAGE CAN BE PROTECTED BY:

- Reducing light pollution in areas of astronomical, cultural, or spiritual significance
- Supporting Indigenous-led astronomy education, tourism, and research
- Ensuring development and tourism projects consult First Nations Knowledge Holders about light use
- Including night-time cultural values in heritage and environmental assessments
- Establishing Dark Sky Places that honour both ecological and cultural knowledge

Respecting the Right to Darkness

Cultural access to the night sky is increasingly viewed as a heritage right, much like clean air and water. In areas where sacred sky stories are told, or seasonal practices depend on dark sky observations, light pollution becomes a form of cultural disconnection.

SOME PROTECTIONS ALREADY EXIST UNDER:

- Aboriginal Heritage Acts (state-based)
- UNESCO World Heritage guidelines
- Cultural impact assessments in land use planning

More are needed.

Every star counts. Every light matters.

Be part of a global effort to restore the night.



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Australasian Dark Sky Alliance

www.australasiandarkskyalliance.org/

How Councils and Communities Can Help

- Partner with First Nations Knowledge Holders to incorporate cultural sky values in planning
- Include light pollution reduction in cultural and environmental policies
- Support local events, tourism and education that celebrate Indigenous astronomy
- Identify and protect dark corridors or culturally sensitive viewing areas
- Reduce unnecessary light in natural landscapes or sacred sites



"Milky Way setting over The Pinnacles Desert, Western Australia" by Trevor Dobson, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0