

Playing the long game

WORDS BY Megan Eaves



Photo by Ruslan Merziyokov, @astrorms (IG)

A seasoned environmental campaigner once gave me some advice that I've never forgotten: "Small wins add up to big change."

Consider for a moment the city of Flagstaff, Arizona. Its designation as the first IDA dark-sky place in 2001 was just one of many milestones dating back to 1958, when this community pioneered the world's first lighting ordinance designed to preserve the night for astronomy. Successful dark-sky advocacy, or environmental campaigning of any kind, takes resilience. And it takes a long time.

Few people understand this better than Fernando Ávila Castro, leader of IDA Mexico and a member of the technical staff of the Institute for Astronomy at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Ensenada. Fernando was instrumental in the passing of a historic piece of federal legislation

this year, the first to recognize artificial light as an environmental pollutant. But it didn't happen quickly.

"It's been a long journey," he says. "The first ordinance in Mexico was in Ensenada, where the National Astronomical Observatory is located. And that was in 2006 — 15 years ago."

Long-term vision

For a decade and a half, Fernando and the many dedicated advocates and campaigners in Mexico have worked across the policymaking landscape, right up to the Chamber of Deputies, Mexico's lower house of Congress.

Their success in finally getting light pollution recognized in the nation's bedrock environmental-protection law depended on having a strategic, long-term approach. This centered on the fact that public light systems generally have a lifespan of between six and eight years, depending on environmental

conditions and wear-and-tear.

"The idea is that, within 10 years, the core infrastructure will comply with the new law," says Fernando.

Advocacy depends on the understanding that the work will take time. It's not feasible to replace every city lamppost or exterior light immediately. Many advocates proclaim their key to success has been in understanding and maneuvering government budgetary requirements and infrastructure timelines.

"You need to think in a long scale," says Fernando. "You have to be patient, you have to be stubborn. Local governments have a limited budget, they can't implement all our proposals right away. So we need to find ways to achieve what we want over the long term."

Persistence and patience

The story is the same for advocates working anywhere in the world.

Alejandro Sommer has been developing astrotourism and dark-sky policy in Argentina for a decade. Only now is he starting to see big payoffs, with the recent passing of a province-wide law for dark-sky protection in his province of Misiones.

Alejandro says the keys to his success were persistence, patience, and knocking on a lot of doors. He enlisted the help of a political advisor to better understand local policy-making and began hosting events to drum up interest.

"You never know who's going to hear your message. At the first astrotourism event, we had the ecology minister with us. I didn't know it at that time, but he would be the next governor. He actually saw the dark and really cared about it," says Alejandro.

Double-ended approach

In Ireland, the dark-sky movement →



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started in the early 2000s with the formation of Dark Sky Ireland, but the country’s first dark-sky place — Kerry International Dark Sky Reserve — wasn’t designated until 2014. Advocate Georgia MacMillan, who subsequently set up Ireland’s first dark-sky park in County Mayo, continues to build on this foundation in advocating for both local and national light pollution legislation.

“I think you have to be very patient. That’s probably the biggest learning curve for me. It’s not going to happen quickly. It’s behavioral change you’re looking to implement, so that takes time,” says Georgia. She recommends that advocates use a double-ended approach, keeping pressure on the national authorities while generating support at the community level.

“I’ve had numerous discussions on the most effective way to make progress and I feel there is no single route,” Georgia explains. “Dark-sky policy is relevant to almost every department

within a government authority and at the same time, every subject in a school. We need to adapt our message to suit the recipient.”

Steps beyond International Dark Sky Place designation

Mont-Mégantic in Québec, Canada started its nocturnal protection efforts in 2003 and was designated the world’s first International Dark Sky Reserve in 2007. Since then, it has continued to expand light pollution policy across the surrounding area. Thanks to Mont-Mégantic’s efforts, the FQM (Québec’s Municipalities Federation) is now offering turnkey solutions for 2200K LED streetlights for municipalities across the province. They have also begun work to put dark-sky practices in place across Québec’s national parks system.

Scientific coordinator Rémi Boucher, who helps lead the Mont-Mégantic reserve, says that his ongoing work is about creating awareness.

“Don’t think it will go fast,” he says. “It is a slow and steady process. There is so much education that needs to be done. Lighting is something that an overwhelming majority of people, including professionals, don’t have any knowledge about.”

For Rémi, it’s passion for the night that has kept him going, even over the past year, when remote work and a reduction in public activities presented major challenges.

“Being able to live and work under a dark sky — working part of the year directly with people, and showing them the wonders of the night sky, really helps me stay grounded,” he says.

As advocates, we must constantly remind ourselves that change rarely happens in a swift moment, but instead as a series of small steps along a journey. So take inspiration from Mexico, Ireland, Argentina, and Canada: Play the long game. Be patient, be stubborn, and think long-term about what is possible in the future. ★