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Rappahannock County Park Awarded International Dark Sky Park Designation

WASHINGTON, Va. — The International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) awarded Rappahannock County Park International Dark Sky Park status at the “silver tier” level on February 21, 2019. It is the third Virginia park to receive a Dark Sky Park designation, the other two being state parks.

“I am very pleased our park has received a Dark Sky Park designation. Our dark sky is one of many assets of Rappahannock County to be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations. The Dark Skies Park designation raises awareness of the value and beauty of our night sky that hopefully protects it from future light pollution,” said Mike Del Grosso, Chair of the Rappahannock County Recreational Facilities Authority (RCRFA) that manages the Park. “Being awarded this prestigious Dark Sky Park designation is a great honor. It validates strong local commitment to maintaining our pristine night skies and opens the Park for night use by astronomy clubs and other groups in the region. Longer term, this designation is a catalyst for increased ecotourism and will accord national as well as international recognition for Rappahannock County Park and the rural nature of the County”, added Torney Van Acker, RCRFA Vice-Chair.

In order to earn this international honor, Park volunteer staff took measurements of the quality of their night sky over the course of a full year, held several educational dark sky events, and engaged in a collaborative effort with the Rappahannock League for Environmental Protection (RLEP) to replace unshielded outdoor lighting in the County, free of charge, with dark-sky compliant fixtures.

The IDA established the International Dark Sky Places (DSP) conservation program in 2001 to recognize excellent stewardship of the night sky. Designations are based on the quality of the night skies, stringent outdoor lighting standards and innovative community outreach. Since the program began, more than 100 Dark Sky Parks, Reserves, Sanctuaries, Communities, and Dark Sky Friendly Developments have received International Dark Sky designations. Rappahannock County Park is the third county park in the U.S. to be awarded this honor. “You should be truly proud of the incredible effort you have put towards this application,” wrote Adam Dalton, IDA’s Dark Sky Places Program Manager, upon congratulating the RCRFA on the designation. “I am immensely impressed by this park’s importance as a venue for community awareness and education. They have expanded park hours to include regular nighttime use by amateur astronomers and members of the public who enjoy dark skies. They have been a wonderful example of

effective grassroots advocacy and deserve to be recognized and rewarded," added Patricia Rostkowski, Coordinator of the Northern Virginia Piedmont Region of the Virginia Chapter of IDA.

The idea for applying for the designation began about a year ago when RLEP approached the RCRFA Board about seeking the designation. "Most of the people on earth have never seen the Milky Way. The world around us is getting brighter," stated Phil Irwin, co-founder of RLEP which was formed in 1970. The Board unanimously adopted the idea and with RLEP's assistance, submitted their formal application ten months later. The Park's location is conveniently located in one of the darker areas of the County and offers facilities suitable for hosting dark sky events.

The designation will be celebrated at the Park's first dark-sky event of the season scheduled for May 4, 2019.

The RCRFA would like to thank the many individuals and organizations who supported the application for a DSP designation. The RCRFA is especially grateful to the Northern Virginia Astronomy Club (NOVAC) for including the Park on their list of outreach opportunities during the application process. The success of the dark sky events was due in large part to the participation of several NOVAC members.

About Rappahannock County Park

The Rappahannock County Park is a 7.3-acre park located centrally in Rappahannock County off Route 211 near the town of "little" Washington, Virginia. It includes woodlands, open areas, wooded nature trails to the Rush River, a covered pavilion with picnic tables for seating up to 100 people, public restrooms, two tennis courts, a basketball court, swings, a climbing wall, a playground area for children, a skateboard park, a horseshoe pit, a shuffleboard court, a cornhole pitch and several benches. A 3-hole frisbee golf course is being added in the spring of 2019.

The Park is used regularly for educational outdoor experiences and learning events by various community organizations in the County. At least four dark sky events are programmed annually. The Park has also been approved by the Old Rag Master Naturalists and Master Gardeners for volunteer hours. The Pavilion can be reserved up to a year in advance for activities such as church events, family reunions, company picnics and other group functions. Please visit our website at: <https://rappahannockcountypark.weebly.com/>.

About IDA

The International Dark Sky Association, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, advocates for the protection of the nighttime environment and dark night skies by educating policymakers and the public about night sky conservation and promoting environmentally responsible outdoor lighting. More information about IDA and its mission may be found at <http://www.darksky.org>.

Media Inquiries

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