

MJ Sharp

My Fulbright year in Cornwall photographing ancient ruins at night

A vanishingly small percentage of our evolutionary time as human beings has been spent in artificial light. For a large percentage of the world's population, the experience of night is quickly becoming a boutique and privileged one. When we are robbed of night—from seeing the night sky that fueled the world's mythologies to experiencing our own creaturely human adaptation to the dark— what are we missing? I was on a 2021/2022 Fulbright Scholar Award to collaborate with nocturnal ecologist Professor Kevin Gaston at the Environment and Sustainability Institute at the University of Exeter, Cornwall to try to answer that question.

Cornwall is remarkable both for its concentration of prehistoric sites and for its dark skies. Archeological evidence from some megaliths (Trethevy Quoit, for example) suggests that people were visiting these sites in liminal light or at night. As they are literally prehistoric, we can only guess at their meaning for the people who created them. Dr. Andy Jones of the Cornwall Archaeological Unit helped me understand the enormous labor that would have been required from the entire community to move and erect these stones. He also emphasized their keen design sense in, for example, strategically selecting granite megaliths that had seams of reflective quartz running through them and placing them in the landscape in very intentional ways. Cornwall-based archaeoastronomer Carolyn Kennett was also terrifically generous with her scholarship and introduced me to the ways that some of these sites likely related to the night sky.

While pursuing a Fulbright in Cornwall was motivated by the way our communal experience of darkness and night is being blotted out by exponentially increasing light pollution, I discovered something else while I was there. Spending time at these sites, with the landscape stretching out before me and the night sky above, it was quite clear that, like every other species on earth, humans belong to the land. Our ability to circumvent that with our modern technologies may be helping us in some ways, but it is leaving us incalculably poorer in others.

Being in a landscape, in darkness, with a cathedral of stars overhead.....that is an increasingly boutique and privileged experience for a lot of the world's people. While it's beyond my scope to address how to reclaim our relationship to the land, I can point folks interested in reclaiming the dark to an excellent worldwide community of dedicated advocates. Join us!

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