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**MEDIA RELEASE**

# **MID MURRAY'S DARK SKIES MAY PROVIDE ASTRO-TOURISM FIRST FOR SA**

Moves are under way to establish a Dark Sky Reserve in the Mid Murray Council district – a first for South Australia, with the potential to lure astronomy enthusiasts and tourists from around the world.

Dark Sky accreditation recognises areas where the absence of light allows for uninterrupted views of the night sky and opportunities for professional and amateur astronomers and tourists alike to look up in wonder.

“It would be like World Heritage listing for the night sky,” Mid Murray Landcare Group vice-chair Chris Tugwell says.

“Most people in this area know how extraordinarily beautiful the night sky is and there is just so much going for this concept.”

Mid Murray Landcare first proposed the idea and has strong support from the Mid Murray Council, along with the Astronomical Society of SA, Conservation Volunteers Australia and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy.

Council’s Development and Environment Director Peter Graves said Council would work with partner agencies to bring the project to life.

“It’s very early days, but this is an incredible idea and, as well as the potential to promote the wonders of astronomy, there is significant tourism potential. Dark Sky recognition would make the night sky yet another reason to visit our stunning region,” Mr Graves says.

Mr Tugwell explained just how dark the Mid Murray skies can be: “Darkness is measured on a scale of 0 to 22, with 22 being total darkness. Preliminary measurements in January near Yookamurra were 21.97 – much darker than many accredited regions in the northern hemisphere.”

The intent would be to establish a Dark Sky Trail, focusing on the area between Cambrai and Sunnydale, however this location may change as the concept progresses.

“If it goes ahead, there would be places recommended for people to camp and set up their telescopes to enjoy the night sky. We would also promote places where tourists could enjoy events or listen to speakers explaining the night sky,” Mr Tugwell said.

A major benefit for tourists and night sky enthusiasts is the relative proximity to a capital city – the trail would be reached in less than two hours’ drive from Adelaide. Many Dark Sky accredited sites are in remote and hard-to-reach places across the world.

There are only 35 formally recognised Dark Sky reserves around the world, with 15 in Canada and others in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom. There is only one Dark Sky reserve in Asia, in South Korea.

Warrumbungle National Park in NSW has recently been declared a Dark Sky Sanctuary and Sea Lake in Victoria is a Dark Sky Community. Regions in Tasmania and Queensland are currently seeking accreditation. There are no Dark Sky sites in SA.

“The most important thing for us in these early stages is to work with the local community and involve them in the planning,” Mr Tugwell said.

“The indigenous night sky is also of great importance, with possible night sky tours for school and community groups describing indigenous constellations. So it’s important to involve the local Aboriginal community.”

The next key steps will be to undertake accurate measurement of darkness in the region, identify a ‘core’ location and outer boundaries of the Dark Sky Reserve and then begin a formal application process.

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