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When the sky is lost to us



I can vividly recall the most star-lit sky of my life. We were travelling in a rickety night bus in the high plains of Bolivia when our vehicle broke down around 3 am in the middle of nowhere. We used the involuntary break to exercise our legs. And there it was: the most remarkable star-lit sky I had ever seen. We stood in the absolute darkness of the night-time wilderness while a sea of stars, the likes of which we

had only known from melodramatic Steven Spielberg movies, stretched out above us.

When I look at the sky at home on a clear night, I can undoubtedly see a few bright stars and may even be able to make out something that resembles the Milky Way. But in contrast to the firmament in the wilds of Bolivia, it is a misty haze. Admittedly, I live close to a light-filled city. Yet even in the Swiss nature the view of the night sky does not compare with the incredible beauty of the skies above the Andes.

My recollection is not clouded. Densely populated Switzerland is now so flooded with light that the stars can only be seen in their full splendour in the most remote corners of the country. This is illustrated by a recent light pollution map produced by an organisation called Dark Sky Switzerland. And it is not just stargazers and astronomers who have started campaigning to protect the night and the right to darkness in recent years. Medical science has now also identified the consequences that permanent light pollution can have on people's health.

So there is much more to it than simply the beauty of the night. I am, however, very much looking forward to the latest Swiss initiative in the fight for darkness. The Gantrisch Nature Park in the foothills of the Bernese Alps – an exceptionally dark spot in the Swiss landscape – is to become the nation's first certified star park. The International Dark Sky Association has already declared 37 regions worldwide official oases of darkness. To these a Swiss one will be added shortly. And I will be one of the first people to pay this park a night-time visit in the hope of again seeing a star-lit sky like the one in Bolivia.

MARKO LEHTINEN, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cover photo:
Adrian Sieber of Lovebugs
(Photo: Keystone)