

Consider preserving the heavenly wilderness above



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

On my list of major concerns, or outright worries, it may not be near the top, yet when I think about it, it's deeply (or highly) concerning. The Sky. In particular, the night sky, but my worries focus on the sky, day or night. It's all sky after all. I read about humans returning to the moon. I read about the number of satellites launching into orbit. I read ... and I think, and worry. My concerns are global, environmental and personal—for many, they may be spiritual too.

The operative phrase is: "when I think about it." Perhaps we aren't supposed to do that too much. Yet this is the case with many things too disturbing to look at too closely, too seriously. We're urged to think about the exciting possibilities for our near neighbor, the moon. New bases (research and military) and maybe a "gas station" to the stars. Bigger rockets, better communication, sending a woman or person of color to the lunar surface. "Think of it!" we're told. We're dazzled by the technological wonders of circling machines that give us what we crave: GPS, internet and phone service. We orbit ourselves with tech and call it

progress and advancement. I'm "down" with much of that too, the upness—higher, faster service. And yet I must ask myself: who or what is serving whom? What are the consequences of more comfort and convenience? What are we doing to the heavens?

When someone in the Bible looks up and speaks of "heaven," they often call attention to "the heavens," the sky. Maybe they are pointing to somewhere above the clouds, beyond the stars? The image is a rather dramatic up/down theology: "The Lord is on His throne" up there and the earth down here is His "footstool." Some believers look upward expectantly, their theological telescopes searching the skies for the return of "the Morning Star."

Earthlings have high hopes for the heavens. "Missionaries" (directed by "mission control") include the U.S., China, Russia, India, Japan and the European Union. The science is amazing, almost miraculous or magical. Spellbound, we may overlook the fact that we're littering these heavenly landscapes with toxic trash, strewn over the pristine soil of our celestial siblings. Each nation seeks to bring data and raw materials back to study, while leaving our human calling-card behind.

Several corporations have set their marketing sights on the moon as well (whose face will we see up there? or maybe a cross?). Closer to our tiny

round home, one company has sent 3,500 satellites into orbit and the FCC has approved 7,500 more (some are visible "trains" of light). By 2050 this same company may have 30,000 in earth orbit. But that's only part of the grand scheme. As early as 2030 a handful of companies may have up to 100,000 satellites in orbit. For a bit more perspective, there are already over 6,500 satellites in orbit along with thousands more pieces of junk, somehow avoiding a collision with the International Space Station. One estimate puts the number of space stuff floating around at 500,000. And all that junk doesn't stay up there. Old satellites, booster rockets, etc., "fall harmlessly" back to earth, usually in the ocean (another endangered wilderness).

In our short-sightedness, we view vast, beautiful open wilderness places—spaces—as prime real estate open for exploitation, mining "resources," and pushing our puny human plans out beyond Planet Hubris. In my view, we should treat The Sky as wilderness, and protect it like a National Park (I once proposed a Neil Armstrong Moon Wilderness Park). Would it help to claim the moon, and all celestial orbs, as sacred sanctuary?

In Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic memoir-novel, "Wind, Sand and Stars," these lines entice our eyes upward: "The first stars tremble as if shrim-

mering in green water. Hours must pass before their glimmer hardens into the frozen glitter of diamonds. I shall have a long wait before I witness the soundless frolic of the shooting stars. In the profound darkness of certain nights I have seen the sky streaked with so many trailing sparks that it seemed to me a great gale must be blowing through the outer heavens." He's awestruck by heavenly lights without satellites, the natural, naked night sky magnified in magnificence, what every creature on earth deserves to see, the greatest open space there is—the wilderness above, around, soundless and full of emptiness. As Carl Sagan wrote: "We have always been space travelers" on this globe orbiting a fiery disk. We share responsibility for this blue-green rock skipping over the bottomless ocean of space, as well as our solar neighborhood.

May our upward view be unobstructed, displaying only Nature's sparkling sands and sparks in the sky, blown by cosmic winds.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).