

Time to Get Balance Right on City's Lights

■ LEADER

Jun 22, 2009

This city continues its love-hate affair with lights. Last night was marked by a cooling off for two hours in the latest Dim It lights-out event. Tonight the affair will resume with its usual glaring intensity, to the delight of visitors who expect to see our famous nighttime skyline.

Did the event achieve anything? It will not have been in vain if it raises awareness that light pollution can waste energy and increase air pollution, and that this does not mean we must choose between being the city of lights and being environmentally responsible. But to strike the right balance, we need to change our ways.

More than 3,500 buildings and companies signed up to take part in last night's event by turning off exterior lights and neon signs from 8pm. Hong Kong no longer outshone the heavens. Telescopes were set up at Tsim Sha Tsui so the public could stargaze, an activity often not possible except in darker parts of south Lantau and Sai Kung.

The relative dim-out reflected the finding of a recent University of Hong Kong study of light pollution - that urban night skies can be up to 500 times as bright as those in the countryside. Too often lights on buildings and in shop windows and illuminated billboards are too bright, poorly designed and left on overnight for no good reason. This wastes energy and contributes to air pollution. Government figures show that from 1997 to 2004, energy consumption rose by 25 per cent while the population rose by only 4.3 per cent. Wasteful lighting is just one factor, but must share the blame for our two power companies burning more polluting coal. Such light pollution can also affect the well-being of urban residents whose sleep is affected by unnatural light.

A recent survey by Friends of the Earth, organiser of last night's event, found that at least 160 sites in the city's business districts still kept neon signs and lights switched on in the early morning. The group's efforts to educate the community and increase public awareness of light pollution continue with the Dim It charter. So far more than 1,000 organisations and groups have pledged regularly to switch off outdoor neon signs and decorative lighting no later than midnight, as from last night.

Hong Kong, however, remains the city of lights. The night skyline sets it apart and is what millions of tourists expect to see. Businesses use bright lights to compete for customers at night. It is an asset that needs to be sympathetically managed rather than subject to heavy-handed regulation. Public and corporate support for last night's Dim It should encourage the government to step up efforts to educate the community in the socially responsible use of light.