LAST ONE TO LEAVE …

PEOPLE beset with wordly troubles should sit on a mountaintop on a clear night as far from civilisation as they can, look at the sky and consider what is really going on.

We hear of atoms, electrons and protons; little balls spinning around each other, bound by invisible forces. We believe, but we don't really understand because we can't see them.

Yet here we are, sitting on a beautiful, colourful, perfect sphere, suspended in inky dark space of unimaginable proportions, and slowly revolving around a brilliant orange ball of burning gases which emits heat and light so reliably that it sustains this miracle called life, but so hot and bright it can burn or blind us.

All around are other planets and stars; constellations and galaxies of spectacular design, but so far away they are merely winking specks.

The revelations this vision inspires begat the disciplines of astronomy and navigation separately in every known civilisation early in their evolution, which in turn spawned mathematics then science.

Discovering fire gave us a mini-sun to cook our food, warm us on cold nights, control our environment

and light up the night.

Fast forward: the Islamic city of Cordoba in Spain in the 11th Century AD had two miles of street lighting, allowing convenience and safety at night.

Now, with advances in technology and cheap energy, we splash artificial light around with such abandon in our communities we can no longer see those stars.

Enter the International Dark Sky Association, a group consisting of astronomers, airline pilots, wildlife biologists, insomniacs and other “crackpots” who lobby for a minimisation of this profligacy when it interferes with their business or daily lives.

Too-bright artificial light at night obscures the stars, confuses aircraft, disrupts the navigation of migrating birds and sea turtle breeding, prevents night-time plant pollination, interferes with the body’s circadian rhythms and keeps people awake.

The IDSA advocates turning on the lights only when necessary and directing them only where needed. Modern technology and design can achieve this without inconvenience if only local government would take up the cause.

When you are out bush at night and turn off your torches, headlamps and lanterns, and allow the fire to die down, you will notice in the visual darkness that your other senses sprout wings: you can hear, smell, feel and sense a bigger world that is familiar but different. Wildlife surveyors use this technique to locate animals which are hiding and say they can even hear the blood coursing through their own ears.

On full moon nights the old man with his Mona Lisa smile floats so near we can make out his mountains and deserts. His power is so strong he can pull the tides, so why not our feelings too? And the eerie light he casts is bright enough that we can see our way.

When printing was invented, along with Bibles, almanacs were the most popular publications, providing information like astrological and tide charts and phases of the moon so farmers knew when to plant and people could plan night-time activities. Even Ned Kelly consulted the almanac to execute his robberies.

… don’t forget to turn off the lights.