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P.G. monarch numbers plummet

Thanksgiving count shows decline

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Butterfly Town USA may be losing its iconic Monarch butterflies, according to an annual count made Thanksgiving weekend.

"These are the worst numbers we have seen in the eight years that we have been monitoring butterfly numbers in Monterey County," said Helen Johnson, sponsor for Monarch Alert Program for Monterey County.

Volunteers count the monarchs each year at nine sites in the county. The Monarch Program, a research organization based in San Diego that collects the data, says that the numbers were down significantly compared with those recorded last year.

At one site in Big Sur, there was a third fewer butterflies. In Pacific Grove, there were 96 percent fewer butterflies seen this year than in 2008, according to the organization.

The data does not surprise Kingston Leong, an entomologist at California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo.

"It is well-recognized that the monarch populations are declining very rapidly," Leong said.

Two factors are responsible for sagging numbers of butterflies, Leong said. Fewer are coming to the region, and the local environment is becoming less hospitable to their needs.

"If you view the winter sites like a very fancy hotel, this hotel is important for winter survival," Leong said. "But the declining numbers suggest that this winter habitat is not suitable."

Previous studies suggest the butterflies are attracted to the trees and the environment, Leong said. The fact that fewer butterflies are coming to Monterey suggests that these features are "not being managed properly," he said.

Arthur Shapiro, an ecology professor at the University of California-Davis, who has been studying butterflies for 34 years, is not sure the answer is so clear-cut.

"Strange things are happening," Shapiro said. "Something is changing and there are all kinds of possibilities why that may be so."

One reason butterflies may not be coming to the area is the unseasonably warm, dry weather, Shapiro said. Monarchs tend to move around depending on weather conditions, he said.

"I would be willing to bet, based on the weather, that there may be a significant number of them north of (Monterey)," Shapiro said. "But there is a major storm coming and that could change things somewhat."

Paul Cherubini, an entomologist who has been studying the numbers of monarchs in the region since 1998, believes the decline is permanent.

"There has been no big 'up years' or 'down years,'" Cherubini said. "They are all down years."

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Shapiro cautions against making such sweeping judgments.

"You can have people moving out of Silicon Valley because there aren't any jobs at the same time as people are rushing to Rosedale because there are jobs," Shapiro said. "If you are just sampling in one place you'll get an incorrect impression of what the population is doing — it is the same with monarchs."

Leong believes the key to attracting more butterflies to the region is carefully managing and restoring the areas they like. He has previously restored a butterfly-snubbed site in Los Osos and seen the butterflies return.

Leong said it is important to act quickly.

"Restoration takes time, and that is why you have to be on top of it," he said. "We have purchased critical sites in California before, and we have ended up with a piece of land and trees and no butterflies."

He believes every effort should be made to entice the monarchs back.

"California is the only state that supports over-wintering butterflies," Leong said. "I think they should be a national treasure and they should be preserved."

Johnson is concerned not only for the monarchs but for the effects their demise might have on tourism in Pacific Grove.

"Thirty percent of the tax dollars supporting Pacific Grove come from the tourists," Johnson said. "If they find out there aren't any monarchs to look at, they'll just go somewhere else."

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