

3-16-2005

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Environmentalists Worried About Dramatic Drop in Monarch Butterflies." (2005). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/4843>

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Environmentalists Worried About Dramatic Drop in Monarch Butterflies

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2005-03-16

Environmental advocates are very concerned about a new government report indicating that the number of Monarch Butterflies wintering in Mexico this year has dropped by about 75% from previous years. The report was produced by the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) using statistics compiled by various government agencies, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and Mexican and US scientists. The population of Monarch Butterflies is the lowest since scientists began to compile detailed migration data 12 years ago.

Field surveys in Michoacan, New Jersey, Minnesota, and Virginia all point to dramatic declines in the number of Monarch Butterflies. Some environmental advocates say the numbers have actually been declining during the past decade, with the most dramatic drop recorded this year. "Their numbers always fluctuate, but if you look at a chart of the past 10 years, it appears the trend is going lower," said Eduardo Rendon, a WWF coordinator in Michoacan.

Advocates argue that the decline in butterflies is a symptom of other serious environmental problems both at the nesting grounds of the butterflies in central Mexico and at their summer habitat in the US and Canada.

The SEMARNAT report focused its blame on a combination of a cold summer in the US, cold and wet weather in Mexico in 2003, and agricultural practices in the US and Canada. The report notes a reduction in butterfly habitat north of the border because of an encroachment of "industrial agriculture" and increased use of herbicides, pesticides, and genetically modified crops in the US and Canada.

Many biologists agree that the factors listed in the SEMARNAT report are valid. They note the use of genetically altered seeds in US areas that are a primary Monarch-Butterfly habitat has sparked a chain reaction. Farmers are now growing heartier corn and soybeans, allowing them to freely spray their fields with herbicides and pesticides. This, in turn, has greatly reduced the supply of milkweed and other plants on which the butterflies feed.

Problem tied partly to illegal logging in Mexico

Mexican environmental advocates, however, have criticized the SEMARNAT report for failing to mention Mexico's significant responsibility in the decline of the Monarch Butterflies. Homero Aridjis, director of the environmental organization Grupo de los Cien, said illegal logging, which the government has failed to control, has disrupted the butterfly's breeding grounds in central Mexico. "The main problem is the illegal loggers," Aridjis said. "If nothing is done...we're going to see fewer and fewer butterflies."

Aridjis' assessment is a sharp contrast to SEMARNAT's report, which notes that forests in the areas frequented by Monarch Butterflies "are healthy or in full recovery." US scientists are backing Aridjis' arguments with satellite photos, which confirm that vast tracts of forest in the 56,000-hectare Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve have been decimated. "The deforestation is increasing per year in each period we studied," said Daniel Slayback, a scientist from the US National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA), who has compared satellite photos from 1976 through 2004. "Whatever measures the Mexicans are taking, they are totally ineffective."

Forests in southern Mexico particularly in the southern states of Michoacan, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas have been decimated primarily by large-scale loggers. "We have detected the existence of a wood cartel that is taking millions of cubic feet of wood illegally," Jose Luis Luege, director of the federal environmental protection agency (Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente, PROFEPA).

Luege did not mention any specific damage to the forests frequented by Monarch Butterflies, but environmental advocates say logging is rampant in the biosphere. In many cases, the loggers threaten or bribe authorities to look the other way while they take the trees. SEMARNAT's decision to downplay Mexico's responsibility in the decline of the butterflies is only a small part of the picture.

Environmental advocates are also angered by SEMARNAT's seeming lack of urgency about the decline in butterfly numbers. "It is clear that the migratory phenomenon of the Monarch Butterfly...is not at risk," said the SEMARNAT report. "This is a species with a great capacity for recovering from die-offs." Biologist Lincoln Brower, one of the world's foremost experts on the Monarch Butterfly, said the species is in real danger of extinction. "All of us firmly believe that the butterfly is capable of rebounding, but there is a limit," said Brower, who teaches at Sweet Briar College in central Virginia. "How many bales of hay can you put on a camel's back before the last straw breaks it?" (Sources: Associated Press, 02/15/05, 02/17/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/17/05; The Washington Post, 02/23/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, Reuters, 03/03/05; The New York Times, 03/10/05)

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