7-9-2008

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Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve Selected as World Heritage Site

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-07-09

The Mexican government has succeeded in gaining a special UN designation for the area covering the nesting grounds of the Monarch butterfly in central Mexico, but environmental advocates have mixed opinions on whether that is sufficient to stop illegal logging in the area. In early July, the UN Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) designated the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in Michoacan and Mexico states as a World Heritage Site. The city of San Miguel de Allende in the central state of Guanajuato was also among 27 sites receiving the UNESCO designation this year.

Officials hope designation deters logging in area

The UNESCO decision to name the Monarch butterfly reserve as a World Heritage Site is a victory for President Felipe Calderon's administration and the Michoacan and Mexico state governments, which have intensified efforts to reduce illegal logging in the habitat, comprising more than 56,000 hectares (see SourceMex, 2007-12-12). A study in 2000 indicated that illegal logging in the area in the span of three decades damaged about 44% of the pine and fir forests that shelter migrating butterflies during the winter.

Environmental advocates had divergent opinions on whether the designation could help efforts by the federal and state governments to reduce the illegal logging in the biosphere. "The UNESCO declaration is not useful without a comprehensive protection policy on the part of the government," said Ivan Restrepo, who writes a column on environmental issues in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. Restrepo raised concerns that the publicity surrounding the designation would serve more than just to prop up Mexico's prestige. "I hope that this move brings a lot of attention to the issue and does not simply provide an opportunity for the government to pat its own back," said the columnist.

Homero Aridjis, who heads the environmental organization Grupo de los Cien, said the designation would reduce logging in two major ways. One, he said, an influx of tourists to the area would bring attention to the plight of the butterflies. In addition, the UNESCO action would help raise awareness among local campesino communities. "I believe that [this designation] is going to halt deforestation because local communities will become more aware of the value of these sanctuaries," said Aridjis, who serves as Mexico's representative to UNESCO.

Administration officials said the efforts to crack down on illegal logging in the area are already bearing fruit. Illegal logging is taking place in only about 6% of the biosphere, said Ernesto Enkerlin, director of the Comision Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP). "We are entering a new phase in the biosphere, a phase of recovery," Enkerlin told the Associated Press. Still, the CONAP official raised concerns about the areas where logging has still not been controlled. "It's a disaster" in these areas, he said.
San Miguel de Allende also receives UNESCO recognition

The UN's World Heritage Committee, which met in Quebec City in July to finalize this year's UNESCO designations, also selected San Miguel de Allende for the special recognition. The committee said the city, known for its Mexican baroque architecture and cobblestone streets, was chosen because of its cultural and artistic diversity and great historic relevance. The designation followed a three-year effort by state and local officials, said the Agencia de noticias Proceso.

The selection committee in particular looked at two sites in San Miguel de Allende, which was founded in 1555. The two sites are the city historic center, also known as the Villa Protectora de San Miguel El Grande, and the Santuario de Jesus Nazareno de Atotonilco, a historic church constructed by the Jesuits in the 18th century.

Mexican independence hero Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla used an image of the Virgin Mary from this church to launch Mexico's fight for independence from Spain. "Given its location, San Miguel de Allende is a crossroad among the Spanish, Creole, and indigenous cultures and constitutes a symbol of the cultural exchange between Europe and Latin America," said the Spanish news agency EFE. San Miguel de Allende is the second site in Guanajuato state to gain the World Heritage Site designation. The other is the historic center of the city of Guanajuato.

With the selection of the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico now has 29 sites that have received the special UNESCO recognition. Among the recent designations are the agave-growing region in western Mexico (see SourceMex, 2006-07-19), the central campus of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), and a group of islands and protected areas in the Gulf of California (see SourceMex, 2005-05-18).

Other important designations are the El Vizcaino whale sanctuary off the coast of Baja California Sur (see SourceMex, 2000-03-08), the historic centers of Morelia, Puebla, Zacatecas, and Oaxaca, and the prehispanic cities of Palenque, Teotihuacan, Chichen Itza, and El Tajin. Chichen Itza was also named in 2007 as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, in a poll conducted through the Internet (see SourceMex, 2007-07-18).

The only other World Heritage site in Latin America selected this year was the historic center of Camaguey in Cuba, with the Joggins Fossil Cliffs in Nova Scotia, Canada, also selected. Other sites are scattered throughout Europe, Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Africa, including the Preah Viheear Temple in Cambodia, the Al Hijr archeological site in Saudi Arabia, the Stari Grad communities in Croatia, the Kuk agricultural site in Papua New Guinea, and the ancient Mijikenda communities in Kenya.

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