

Looking out for the monarchs

By St. Louis Post-Dispatch, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.14.14

Word Count **450**



A monarch butterfly rests on a plant inside Norfolk Botanical Garden's butterfly house in Norfolk, Virginia.
Photo: Adrin Snider/Newport News Daily Press/MCT

WASHINGTON — Environmentalists are worried about the monarch butterfly. The colorful, graceful insect is disappearing fast.

The number of monarch butterflies in the United States has fallen drastically. In 2013, groups say the number of butterflies was down to almost one-tenth of its usual average.

In other words, if over the last 20 years the monarch population was around 100 butterflies, last year there were 10.

A group of people want to stop this rapid decline. They asked the government to call the monarch butterfly an endangered species. They would be protected by the Fish and Wildlife Service if they were called endangered. There are laws put in place to protect them.

Helping Crops Is Hurting Monarchs

These environmentalists wrote a report, called a petition. They asked Fish and Wildlife to protect the disappearing insect.

They believe that a company named Monsanto is to blame for the rapid loss of monarchs. Monsanto produces chemicals that help certain plants grow stronger and faster. One of their products is called Roundup. It is a spray that farmers use on crops. Roundup helps kill weeds.

But Roundup also kills milkweed. Milkweed is the monarch caterpillar's only source of food. Farmers are destroying the monarch's food source by using Roundup. When a caterpillar starves, it cannot turn into a butterfly.

The environmentalists said that the use of Roundup and other crops has "wiped out milkweed plants."

Monarchs Are Sensitive

However, Monsanto Company disagrees.

Charla Lord is a spokeswoman for Monsanto. She said there are many reasons the monarchs might be dying. She believes that "weather events" and "logging in Mexico" kill milkweed. She said that Monsanto would help restore the habitats.

In addition to chemicals like Roundup, other factors indeed threaten butterflies. The climate can affect butterflies. When there is a heat wave or a drought, butterflies may die because they cannot find water. Also, humans can damage butterfly habitats by building homes and cutting down trees and plants.

Scientists know that there is not much time. In the mid-1990s, there were about 1 billion butterflies in North America. In 2013, there were only 35 million.

Butterflies Need Attention, Too

Tierra Curry, who works at the Center for Biological Diversity, hopes that good weather this year will help increase the population.

"We're at risk of losing a symbolic backyard beauty that has been part of the childhood of every generation," she said.

The environmentalists think the endangered species label will help draw attention to the butterflies and help protect them.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is required to respond to the petition within 90 days, although they may not issue a decision for up to nine months. The monarch butterfly is not yet specially protected.

Quiz

- 1 According to the article, which of the following sentences is FALSE?
- (A) Environmentalists want monarch butterflies to be declared an endangered species.
 - (B) Monsanto produces chemicals like Roundup that kill monarch butterflies.
 - (C) There are various factors that have led to the disappearance of monarch butterflies.
 - (D) Pleasant weather might play a role in increasing the population of monarch butterflies.

- 2 Read the following sentence from the article.

When a caterpillar starves, it cannot turn into a butterfly.

What is the author referring to in the above sentence?

- (A) The monarch butterfly is unable to feed on engineered plants.
 - (B) Milkweed is the only source of food of monarch caterpillars.
 - (C) Feeding on milkweed is hampering the monarch caterpillar's growth pattern.
 - (D) The absence of milkweed is leading to the declining number of monarch butterflies.
- 3 In the view of the environmentalists, which of the following has had a major impact on the declining population of monarch butterflies?
- (A) the large-scale use of chemical sprays to kill wilkweeds
 - (B) the non-inclusion of monarch butterflies in the endangered species list
 - (C) the practice of farming genetically engineered crops
 - (D) the changing weather patterns, like snow and frost

- 4 What are the two important causes for the steep fall in the monarch butterfly's population over the years?
- (A) not being in the endangered species list and the use of Roundup on weeds
 - (B) slack attitude of state officials and insufficient conservation measures
 - (C) extreme temperatures and the use of Roundup
 - (D) human intervention and the lack of natural habitat

Answer Key

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