

Monarch butterflies on the rise again after years of lower numbers

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

Grade Level 3

03.16.16

Word Count 403



MEXICO CITY, Mexico — Monarch butterflies are coming back, experts said.

Each year, the butterflies make a 3,400-mile trip. They fly from the United States and Canada to Mexico. They spend the winter in the mountains west of Mexico City. The area is called the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. Then they fly back up north. Fewer butterflies have been making the trip than 20 years ago. Now, that is changing. This year there are many more of them.

Alejandro del Mazo is the head of Mexico's protected natural areas. He thinks that there were 140 million monarchs this year. The goal is to have 220 million butterflies in the reserve by 2020.

Counted By Area They Cover

The butterflies are small. They crowd together in a small space. They are counted by the area they cover.

This December the butterflies covered 10 acres. In 2013 they covered just 1.66 acres. An acre is about 1/6 of a mile.

It is good news. Yet, the monarchs still face problems. The butterflies covered 44 acres just 20 years ago.

One problem is milkweed. The butterflies feed on milkweed and lay their eggs on it. Yet the plant has been disappearing from the United States. People have killed it with weedkillers. Also, there is not as much open space for milkweed to grow. The United States is working to solve the problem and will grow milkweed on about 1,200 square miles.

People Are Cutting Down Trees That Butterflies Need

Butterflies have another problem. In Mexico, people are cutting down trees without permission. They are destroying the forest canopy. The tree tops act like a blanket for the butterflies.

Without the canopy, the butterflies would be out in cold and rain, said Lincoln Brower. He is a monarch expert. They could die, he said.

Knowing Where to Go For Winter

Monarchs are hatched knowing to fly south for the winter. No butterfly lives to make the full round trip. They find their way back to the same areas in Mexico each year. Scientists do not know how they do it.

Some scientists think the butterflies may release chemicals. They mark the migration route. Without enough butterflies, there will not be enough chemicals. Then other butterflies will not know where to go.

Homero Aridjis is a writer. He also protects the environment. Better weather helped the monarchs this year. Yet, people must stop cutting down the trees, he said.