

# California's Monarchs numbers dwindling

*Butterflies*  
Dramatic decrease seen at popular Central Coast sites

R-P STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

California's Monarch butterflies — whose appearance in winter is a celebrated show of color and beauty that draws tourists from around the world — have dwindled in numbers this year, and may be in the midst of a longer-term decline.

"Our numbers are dramatically fewer," said Sarah Hamilton of the Ventana Wilderness Society, a group that counts the orange and black butterflies as they spend the winter clustering in California's coastal groves of eucalyptus, pine and cypress.

In Monterey County, Hamilton's counts have found only about a third as many butterflies this winter as last. And some of her group's counts hint that Monarch populations may have been declining for several years, although nobody knows why.

But even with the diminishing



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A Monarch butterfly clings to a flower at the Monarch Grove Sanctuary in Pacific Grove on Friday. California's Monarch butterflies — whose appearance in winter is a celebrated show of color and beauty that draws tourists from around the world — have dwindled in numbers this year and may be in the midst of a longer-term decline.

numbers, tourists are still flocking to the California coast to see the insects, said Ro Vaccaro, president of the Friends of the Monarchs in Pacific Grove, a town so crazy about the little creatures that it has a Butterfly Parade, a Monarch Avenue and a \$1,000 city fine for anyone who

molests a Monarch.

"The ones that made it are looking pretty good," Vaccaro said.

Monarchs are famous for both their beauty and their stamina. East of the Rocky Mountains, the butterflies make an extraordinary annual migration of thousands of

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miles, flying from summer habitats in the United States to wintering grounds in Central Mexico.

In California, the butterflies generally make a shorter journey, flying from the Central Valley to the Pacific Coast, but they are still popular with tourists and nature-lovers alike.

Volunteers spend hours peering through binoculars trying to count the butterflies as they huddle together, a difficult task that makes a precise count impossible.

"We try to count their feet and divide by six, but that doesn't always work," Vaccaro joked.

Still, the best estimates show a decline.

In Santa Cruz, Natural Bridges State Beach volunteer Susan Karon said she hadn't noticed fewer butterflies this year, but in fact she said there seemed to be more clusters compared to last year. But if you look back a decade, Karon said the decrease was startling.

"People who haven't been here in 10 to 15 years would be amazed at how many fewer there are," she said.

Her fellow volunteer, George See MONARCHS, page 10

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Hoffman, said the recent drought combined with human intervention with the butterflies' habitat were mostly to blame. "Three years ago there were 7,000 butterflies here, now there's about 700."

Dennis Frey, a professor of biological sciences at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo, estimated there might be only a million Monarchs in California's 300 wintering sites this year, down from roughly 1.5 million last year and perhaps the lowest count in a decade.

In Pacific Grove, the heartland of Monarch tourism, an annual Thanksgiving count at a key habitat site has shown a steady decline since 1997, Hamilton said.

The reason for the longer-term drop remains a mystery, but Frey thinks this winter's butterfly shortage may be due to a late-winter drought last year. The lack of rain meant less milkweed, the summer plant where the butterflies lay their eggs and which then becomes their only food source as caterpillars.

Less summer milkweed means fewer winter butterflies, experts said.

"It takes a fat, juicy caterpillar to make a beautiful, healthy butterfly," Vaccaro said.



Associated Press

Monarch butterflies hang from a tree at the Monarch Grove Sanctuary in Pacific Grove on Friday.