

# SAVING THE MONARCHS

Butterfly population declines sharply, nonprofits say; federal protections sought



PHOTOS BY SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

Monarch butterflies in the eucalyptus trees at Natural Bridges State Park.

*Butterflies*  
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**SANTA CRUZ »** The monarch butterfly, an iconic insect known to winter at Natural Bridges State Beach and Pacific Grove, is endangered of becoming extinct.

A coalition of nonprofits filed a petition in August with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to place the butterfly under the protection of the Endangered Species Act. The group cited a number of threats to the population that include commercialization of the insects and dwindling habitats.

The most alarming statistic shows the monarch population sharply declined since the 1990s, going from an estimated 1 billion in 1997 to 35 million in 2013, according to

the report.

"You know, the monarch is one of our most iconic insects in the country," said Sarina Jepsen, endangered species director of the Portland, Oregon-based Xerces Society. "I think it would be really tragic to lose such an emblem of almost every child's summer experience."

The butterflies are renowned for passing through Natural Bridges State Beach beginning in October and staying through February.

The park shelters up to 100,000 monarchs from the late fall into the winter until temperatures rise in the spring, according to the Natural Bridges website. Their migration is a major draw for the beach, with thousands of tourists flocking there each year to get a glimpse of the insects.



Thousands of monarch butterflies reside each winter in the eucalyptus trees at Natural Bridges State Park in Santa Cruz which is the southern end of their annual migration.

**"The monarch story is a very visual, easy to understand example of those impacts and how significant they are and that we have to address them."**

— George Kimbrell, senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity



# Monarch

FROM PAGE 1

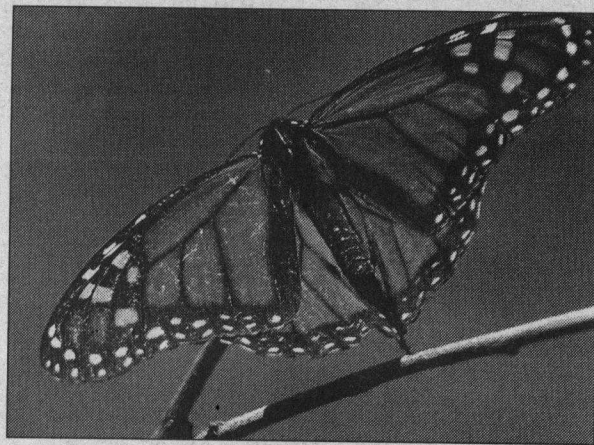
"Monarchs are so important to people in the Santa Cruz area," Jepsen said. "It's one of the few places in our whole country where monarchs gather in these spectacular winter gatherings."

But the habitat and plant essential to their survival, milkweed, has been wiped out because of widespread use of Roundup, a pesticide produced by agricultural giant Monsanto. Monarch caterpillars eat the plant to build up a poison in their bodies that wards off predators.

In 1997, there were more than 100,000 monarchs counted at Natural Bridges. The number has declined to less than 5,000 in recent years, according to Jepsen.

While an estimated 35 million monarchs seems like a large number for the butterfly population at face value, it's not, said Tierra Curry, senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity.

"It is still a lot of butterflies but if you look at the other threats that mon-



A monarch butterfly alights on a eucalyptus branch at Natural Bridges State Park.

archs are facing, they're really sensitive," Curry said.

In 2002, a winter storm in Mexico killed an estimated 500 million butterflies, roughly 15 million times the current population. Because of that, the nonprofits believe the population needs to grow, Curry said.

Though the petition is filed, the process required to protect a species under the act is lengthy and includes a review of the petition by Fish and Wildlife Service to determine its validity, an period where members of the scientific and public weigh in on the issue and a final review pe-

riod.

The process will likely take a minimum of three years, Curry said.

Also among the petitioners is the Center for Food Safety, a nonprofit dedicated to curbing the use of harmful food production technologies.

George Kimbrell, senior attorney for the center, said its part in the petition is simple: To show the environmental impact.

"For our work at the center for food safety, it's an important story because a lot of what we do is address the impact of industrial agriculture on our environment," Kimbrell said.

## SAVING THE MONARCHS

**What:** Petition filed by several nonprofits to list monarch butterflies as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

**When:** The petition was filed Aug. 26 and will be reviewed by Fish and Wildlife, after which it will be reviewed publicly before the insects can be placed under federal protection.

**Locally:** Monarch butterflies begin to flock to Santa Cruz in October and stay through the winter until February.

**Numbers:** There were a billion monarch butterflies in 1997 but the number has dropped to 35 million as of 2013. In Santa Cruz, the population dropped from more than 100,000 to less than 5,000 in that same period.

**Details:** For information about monarch migration patterns at Natural Bridges State Beach, visit <http://tinyurl.com/5ty8jv>.

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