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Classroom-Raised Monarch Butterflies Take Flight at Ethel A. Jacobsen School

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Oct 05, 2016



Courtesy of: EJ School

Lisa Boyd's preschool students at the Ethel A. Jacobsen Elementary School in Surf City have recently made a number of colorful new friends: monarch butterflies the children raised in classroom habitats and released in the schoolyard garden. "While the month of September is well-known for the flurry of children returning to school, it also heralds the annual migration of monarch butterflies to warm climates for overwintering," Boyd explained.

"The students have been observing, making predictions, listening to stories and acting out the life cycle of the monarch using interactive Smart Boards," she added. The preschool is also sharing the habitats with additional classes at the E.J. School, whose students "are awestruck with investigating the monarchs' progress."

At the end of last month, the students had tagged and released 11 butterflies in the E.J. garden, and had eight chrysalises and six caterpillars of varying stages.

The tagging ties into a collaboration with Monarch Watch, which coordinates a monarch waystation program to help protect monarch habitat, which includes milkweed and nectar sources. Milkweed is an

essential plant for monarchs; adult female monarchs lay their eggs on the underside of the milkweed, the only plant the larvae will eat.

As noted on monarchwatch.org, “Monarch waystations are places that provide resources necessary for monarchs to produce successive generations and sustain their migration. Without milkweeds throughout their spring and summer breeding areas in North America, monarchs would not be able to produce the successive generations that culminate in the migration each fall. Similarly, without nectar from flowers these fall migratory monarch butterflies would be unable to make their long journey to overwintering grounds in Mexico. The need for host plants for larvae and energy sources for adults applies to all monarch and butterfly populations around the world.”

Studies continue to show a rapid decrease in numbers of monarchs, in large part due to habitat loss from development in the United States, deforestation in Mexico and the widespread use of herbicides for crops. As the Center for Biological Diversity pointed out, “The vast majority of genetically engineered crops are made to be resistant to Monsanto’s Roundup herbicide, a uniquely potent killer of milkweed, the monarch caterpillar’s only food. The dramatic surge in Roundup use with Roundup Ready crops has virtually wiped out milkweed plants in midwestern corn and soybean fields.”

“Because 90 percent of all milkweed/monarch habitats occur within the agricultural landscape, farm practices have the potential to strongly influence monarch populations,” Monarch Watch notes. “Without a major effort to restore milkweeds to as many locations as possible, the monarch population is certain to decline to extremely low levels,” the group adds. “By creating and maintaining a monarch waystation, you are contributing to monarch conservation, an effort that will help assure the preservation of the species and the continuation of the spectacular monarch migration phenomenon.”

According to Boyd, E.J. School nurse Bianca Aniski, along with the LBI PTA, “made it possible for us to certify the E.J. rain garden as a monarch waystation with the Monarch Watch organization. Through generous donations from the community, Karen Beetle’s students are planting milkweed to encourage the monarchs’ full life cycle. A milkweed waystation located in our rain garden will allow the butterflies’ life cycle to be observable within the schoolyard. These hands-on, cross-curricular activities are both engaging and educational as science comes to life for our students.”

Meanwhile, said Boyd, world language teacher Rosa Warfel and art teacher Lisa Benjamin “are reinforcing this experience with creative and virtual activities such as the symbolic migration through Journey North,” at learner.org/jnorth/maps/monarch.html. “This resource promotes sharing information about sightings and migration using interactive maps for students to view.”

And, as technology teacher Shelley Smith remarked, “During technology class, students use MS Word to compose brief greetings in Spanish using special character codes. The greetings are sent along with our symbolic butterflies to students who attend schools near the monarch sanctuary in Mexico.”

All in all, Aniski noted, Boyd – “our school’s ‘Queen of the Butterflies,’” has done “an awesome job creating 4-year-old citizen scientists.”

— **Juliet Kaszas-Hoch**