

San Francisco Chronicle

Butterfly counters miffed at S.F. museum

[Matthew B. Stannard, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Saturday, October 4, 2008



Liam O'Brien was sitting down for dinner Sept. 27 when he flipped on the television news to see a flock of monarch butterflies delighting the opening day crowds at the California Academy of Sciences - and just about choked on his meal.

Where the happy crowds saw a colorful display of natural wonder, O'Brien saw a flock of alien invaders - just a few flaps away from the grove of eucalyptus trees where he volunteers each year to count the local population of monarchs as part of a statewide monitoring program.

"To release ... butterflies so close to a roost completely compromises the season," O'Brien said. "I cannot walk into the Botanical Garden and say those are not from the back of some woman's car."

A few butterflies more or less might seem to make little difference. But those orange intruders flapped straight into a controversy: a debate over scientific method and the ethics of humanity's relationship with the animal world.

Academy officials say they did not - and would not - do anything to harm science or nature. But critics of the release, all of whom insist they are fans of the academy's work overall, say they are disappointed.

The release was just part of the academy's huge celebration of its new eco-friendly building in Golden Gate Park. The academy included details of the planned extravaganza - including the butterfly release - in the fall issue of its magazine, *Live*, sent to its members. Among those who received the magazine was Mia Monroe, a National Park Service ranger. She also is a volunteer California coordinator for the monarch campaign of the Xerces Society, a Portland conservation society.

For years, volunteers like O'Brien have helped monitor monarchs in their annual winter migration from the chilly Sierra Nevada foothills to coastal California.

"There's been a steady decline," Monroe said. "Last year and the year before were years of precipitous population drops."

This year's count will take place over several weeks in November, Monroe said. But now there's a problem.

"Coincidentally, when the academy released the monarchs, it was at the same time that the monarchs were returning to the coast. And because we're predicting a very small population, each monarch released is a substantial increase in population," she said.

Monroe passed her concern on to the Xerces Society, which in turn contacted the academy, asking whether the insects were from a local source, which, if so, would reduce the threat of spreading disease or genetic contamination. The society did not inform academy officials of its nearby monitoring program.

"If the academy had been aware of that, we would have been open to other ideas," said academy President John Hafernik. "We would probably have made more of an effort to mark the monarchs as well, to see if they aggregated in that area. That would have been interesting."

Xerces Society Executive Director Scott Hoffman Black said he regrets not telling the academy about the monitoring program, but was disappointed that officials conducted the release at all.

About 100 butterfly breeders in the United States are members of the 10-year-old International Butterfly Breeders Association, including Utterback Farms, the Sacramento-area breeder that supplied the academy with 500 butterflies.

Butterflies are released at ceremonies from weddings to funerals as a powerful and beautiful symbol of rebirth, and association spokesman Dale McClung said the organization places a priority on educating members about breeding disease-free insects.

Critics of the practice have dogged the industry since it began, McClung said, fearing the spread of disease.

"It has been an ongoing business for a decade now, and there has been absolutely no evidence of any adverse effect to the monarch population," McClung said.

But Black said the practice throws off monitoring efforts, citing an example of monarchs showing up unexpectedly in far-off, chilly British Columbia. Climate change? Or a nearby wedding?

"I don't think you would have seen (the academy) release birds or even crabs without more study or understanding of what this did to the ecosystem," Black said. "We've gotten into this mind-set that releasing butterflies is OK, but nobody does it with anything else."

The academy takes a balanced view, advocating for responsible releases - local, nonthreatened species in appropriate habitats, such as the academy's new living roof, which hopefully will become a new roosting area.

Monroe argued, however, that the best outcome of the teapot tempest over the academy's butterfly release would be new legislation outlawing such releases altogether - even though she recognized the emotional power of seeing a cloud of glorious color rising on tiny wings.

"My heart soared when I saw those monarchs," Monroe said, putting her in mind of past years when the butterflies naturally swarmed by the thousands. "Maybe there will be a day again that we can see monarchs like that."

E-mail Matthew B. Stannard at mstannard@sfchronicle.com .

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/04/BA2L13B3HJ.DTL>