

station on Main Street. I frequently imagined all the fires within a thirty-mile radius would burn out of control, the resulting damage leaving the townspeople calling my name. When I blew out candles, I feared the escape of burning embers. When I lit the charcoal briquettes in the domed grill on my patio, my hands shook with dread. A grass fire, grease fire, bonfire, didn't matter. Invisible fires lurked beneath the horizon of every windy day.

The firemen in the firehouse spent a lot of time lifting weights. Sometimes they turned up the music so loud it drowned out the sound of my television next door. I worried the firemen would be deaf to the fire alarm and a single spark out there somewhere would grow into an inferno. And accidents, as they say, happen. Accidents happen. And I wondered, too, if all the fires were somehow my fault, like, what if there was a fire in a furniture store, right there on Main Street, and, in spite of my best efforts, I couldn't figure out how it started?

[Douglas Haynes]

## Of Monarchs and Men

"Monarchs are really Mexican, not American," my twenty-three-year-old guide, Eduardo,<sup>1</sup> said in Spanish as millions of the orange, black, and white butterflies fluttered around us like autumn leaves with a purpose.

The monarchs morphed fir limbs into frilly curtains. They disappeared entire trunks. And when the sun emerged from behind intermittent cloudbanks, the monarchs airbrushed the sky. Their collective wing-strokes sounded like soft rain.

I expected my jaw to drop at this butterfly spectacle; I had traveled to a remote mountain in central Mexico called Cerro Pelón solely to witness it. I didn't expect, though, that my human encounters in the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve would make me wonder if there's hope for the long-term survival of the monarchs and the Mexican communities that depend on them for their livelihoods. If you care about monarchs, it became clear during my January visit to the Reserve, you should care about the roughly 780,000 Mexicans who live in the Reserve, too.

One of these locals, my guide Eduardo, made me rethink where monarchs are at home. To me, monarchs belong in places like the Wisconsin field where I had seen them on a tagging outing a few months before: a green expanse of alfalfa dotted with milkweed, monarch caterpillars' sole food.

Monarchs live much longer in Mexico than in the United States, however, Eduardo explained. "Five months here in Mexico, four months migrating, and only a few months in *El Norte*." A smile lit his broad, brown face.

But Eduardo's redefining of monarch nationality wasn't just a joking matter of semantics. What happens to monarchs in Mexico determines how many monarchs color U.S. and Canadian backyards and fields every summer. The Methuselah generation of monarchs—named after the oldest person in the Old Testament—hatch in late summer throughout the eastern U.S. and Canada. They then migrate

<sup>1</sup>Eduardo is a pseudonym used to protect the privacy of this person for the sake of his safety. Luis and Alejandro, who appear later in this essay, are also pseudonyms.

en masse to Mexico to save the species from perishing in the northern winter, making them the longest-lived monarch generation. No one knows exactly how the monarchs find their hibernation sites in the highlands of the states of Michoacán and México, since these individual butterflies have never been there. Somehow, every October, millions of monarchs find the same twelve permanent hibernation sites above 9,000 feet in elevation. The monarchs cluster on these scattered sites, covering a total of only two to twelve acres, from November to March.

In these five months every year, the easily-viewed monarch colonies trigger an influx of more than 100,000 tourists to the Monarch Reserve. These tourists annually bring hundreds of thousands of dollars to the mostly impoverished Reserve communities, but the income is very unevenly distributed. The local people who benefit the most collect fees, work as guides and *vigilantes* (“rangers”), or provide food and lodging to visitors. In the remaining seven months of the year, Reserve residents struggle to survive from small-scale agriculture, forestry, and remittances from family members in the U.S. and Canada. Thousands migrate to search for work in Mexican cities or *el otro lado*: “the other side” of the Mexican-U.S. border.

The village of Macheros—an official entrance to the Monarch Reserve on Cerro Pelón—consists of a few dozen concrete houses, an elementary school, and a one-room church, all surrounded by a patchwork of cornfields, avocado groves, and dense, pine-oak forest. I arrived there with Luis, a lean twenty-six-year-old who works as a driver for the hotel where I stayed the night before. A woman who met our car in Macheros directed Luis to park in her yard. Turkeys and chestnut-colored chickens scattered across shorn grass when we stepped out of the car. Split firewood sprawled across one corner of the lot.

A few minutes later, I found myself saddled on a tawny horse. Four Mexicans accompanied me: Luis, two boys under ten to take care of my horse and the one Luis rode, and Eduardo, our guide.

We left the village on an unpaved road that rose through a lush arroyo and soon became a gully of ankle-deep dust. Piles of logging slash and occasional stumps appeared

along the trail. Every year, local people blaze a new trail to where the monarchs are, Eduardo told me. This opens up new areas to logging, which is illegal in the Monarch Reserve’s three core zones, one of which surrounds Cerro Pelón.

“The white wood of the fir trees farther up the mountain brings the most money,” Eduardo continued. “The red pine and oak lower down bring less.”

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, logging and agricultural expansion have reduced the Monarch Reserve’s largest tract of the oyemel fir trees Eduardo referred to by four-fifths, “fragmenting it into islands of thinned woodland more easily invaded by rain, frost and disease.” This makes the monarchs increasingly vulnerable, since they prefer to hibernate in oyemel fir forests, which provide a unique microclimate that shelters the butterflies from the lethal combination of rain and frost.

“Deforestation is already contributing to the mortality of overwintering monarchs,” says Chip Taylor, Director of the non-profit conservation group, Monarch Watch. As an example, he cites the monarch colony on Cerro Pelón—“one of the most deforested areas in the region”—where “a large proportion” of the monarchs died after a frost in 2007.

My first impression of Cerro Pelón confirmed Taylor’s assessment of its deforested nature. On the way up the mountain, I saw few trees of any kind more than one foot in diameter and wondered how so much logging could occur in a protected area.

Local people’s poverty and transnational forces that exacerbate it are at least partly to blame. In his article, “Confronting Globalization in the Community Forests of Michoacán, Mexico,” Washington State University sociologist Daniel Jaffee explains that the illegal logging is fueled to some extent by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). “As corn agriculture becomes less viable in the face of cheap corn imports under NAFTA and reduced government subsidies,” Jaffee writes, “many rural people . . . turn in hard times to their forests (if they have any) as a ready cash reserve, often leading to increased clandestine logging.”

Cheap corn imports are not the only negative impact on Mexicans and monarchs originating north of the border, however. The Wisconsin alfalfa field dotted with milkweed where I watched monarchs being tagged is becoming an American agricultural rarity. Midwestern corn and soybean fields once hosted millions of monarchs due to the abundance of milkweeds between the rows. But American farmers' increased spraying of Monsanto's herbicide Roundup has eliminated milkweed from vast swathes of U.S. farmland.

Chip Taylor reports that monarchs have lost at least one hundred million acres of milkweed habitat in the U.S. since 1996, due to Roundup's widespread use on genetically-modified corn and soybeans. This loss of milkweed likely means that fewer monarchs migrate to Mexico. In 2009-2010, the hibernating monarch population in Mexico was lower than it had ever been recorded. The monarchs covered a forest area of just 1.92 hectares, barely a quarter of the long-term average area of 7.44 hectares. In other words, the butterflies that sustained eastern North America's entire monarch population overwintered last year on an area the size of about three-and-a-half football fields.

After an hour of climbing through the woods, we reached a level clearing where two pickup trucks were parked. I asked Eduardo how they got there and why they were there.

"They came up from the other side, in Michoacán," he said, "to cut wood, though they're not supposed to."

On one side of the clearing, a barbed-wire fence marked off several acres of scrubland dotted with three-foot wide stumps, debris from cut trees, and denuded patches of pale earth.

"The fence was meant to stop people from logging," Eduardo said, but it obviously hadn't. "Five years ago, this was all forest. Come back here in a year, and this place will look completely different."

I thought of another ineffectual fence: the 670 mile-long steel barrier that the U.S. government has almost finished erecting along part of its border with Mexico. This fence has slowed but not stopped undocumented migrants from entering the United States. People's drive to survive transcends borders, much as the monarchs' migration does.

From the treeless clearing, I could see that about half way to the mountain's summit, monarchs tinted a cluster of fir trees orange. As we snaked our way toward these trees, butterflies appeared in flying twos and threes. We also encountered about twenty Mexicans, mostly tourists. One woman had brought up a steel bucket of sodas and water, which she placed on a trailside tree stump big enough for the toddler she was minding to have lain down on.

Just past the woman selling drinks, flying monarchs gradually enveloped us. The insects swayed and swooped around my head, making me feel distracted, as if it were impossible to watch just one. We were about to stop to gaze longer when we met a Canadian couple I had talked to at the hotel the night before. They urged us to continue ascending because the monarchs were even more concentrated higher up.

From the two Canadians, I also learned that their guide Alejandro works seven months a year on a ginseng plantation near Bradford, Ontario. For the rest of the year, he guides monarch tourists from the hotel. His contract with an agribusiness in Canada allows him to fly back and forth legally.

Most recent Mexican migrants aren't fortunate enough to have papers like Alejandro, though. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 80 to 85 percent of the Mexicans who've been in the U.S. for less than a decade are undocumented. Many of them come from the state of Michoacán, where most of the monarch colonies are located. In 2008, the Michoacán State Legislature's Migrant Affairs Commission reported that the state had lost 400,000 people to emigration from 2002-2008, roughly 10 percent of the state's total population.

My driver, Luis, was once one of these emigrants. He worked in Virginia for five years installing hardwood floors, a trade he can't use in rural Mexico where such floors are nonexistent. He can use the English he acquired in the U.S., though, and he hopes to become a guide in the Monarch Reserve.

I asked Luis how he got to the U.S. He had a visa, he said, but his wife didn't. So they paid a *coyote* \$3,000 to guide them north, wading across the Rio Grande to Eagle Pass, Texas.

"It was easy," Luis told me.

But going back to the U.S.—which Luis would like to do—wouldn't be. It's too dangerous now that the U.S.'s expanding border fence is pushing Mexican migrants into remote desert crossings, Luis explained, and he and his wife have a four-year-old daughter to look after.

Everywhere I went during my month-long stay in central Mexico, I confronted this irony: I, who could travel at will to Mexico, was usually being driven or guided by Mexicans who had lived in my country but couldn't go back without risking their lives and/or the possibility of never seeing their families in Mexico again.

This basic inequality amounts to more than difference in freedom of movement. It points to how U.S. corporations exploit both cheap Mexican labor (both illegal in the U.S. and legal in the U.S.-owned factories that line the Mexican side of the border) and unlimited access to Mexican markets for their products. Trade that allows products and corporations to move across borders without simultaneously allowing people to is not truly free, especially among countries with vastly disproportionate economies such as the U.S. and Mexico. This lack of real free trade partly explains why the Mexicans I met were acutely aware of how the U.S. shapes their lives, while Americans are often oblivious about how the U.S. economy and government policies influence many Mexicans' decision to migrate north of the border.

Following the Canadians' advice, we continued ascending as far as the trail allowed, to a forest opening where the monarchs draped skinny firs on both sides of the trail. There, we sat on boulders among giant purple lupine flowers to watch the monarchs ebb and flow through the air in tandem with the sun slipping in and out of the gray-bellied clouds.

In the sunless intervals when few monarchs flew, I noticed they covered the ground, too: some alive, some dead from frost or a severed wing. One monarch missing half a wing tried ceaselessly to fly out from between two rocks to no avail, a commonplace casualty that reminded me of too many Mexicans lost and dying in the desert borderlands.

I asked Eduardo if he knew anyone from Macheros living in the U.S. He said that between twenty and thirty

locals were working in "El Norte" (out of the village's roughly five hundred people). Other than guiding or feeding tourists during the five-month monarch season, the only way to make money in Macheros is to grow avocados. One hundred avocado trees can generate the same income as a year of work in the U.S., Eduardo said. But this many trees require land, and the only way to get money to buy land is to find a job in the U.S.

"It's hard to find a wife, too," added Eduardo, who's single, "because the local women won't marry anyone who doesn't have a car and a house."

And it's difficult to get these without land or leaving the village.

Eduardo doesn't want to go to the U.S., though, unlike most of the young men in the village, who he said "don't value the land" like the older people.

His desire to stay means he still lives with his parents and siblings and farms a couple of acres of corn with horses to help feed the family (no one in Macheros owns a tractor).

After NAFTA allowed cheap U.S. corn to flood Mexican markets in the mid-1990s, the price of corn in Mexico plummeted. Subsequently, corn has become primarily a crop of the poor in central Mexico, states a 2004 report by Mexico's International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center. Corn—once an emblem of Aztec and Mayan civilizations—is now an emblem of Mexicans who must grow food to subsist.

Because corn is no longer much of a saleable commodity in places like Macheros, it "will go almost extinct" there, Eduardo told me on Cerro Pelón.

And without corn, a Mexican saying goes, there's no country. Mexico's native, staple crop has joined the threatened butterflies, forests, and communities of the Monarch Reserve, all intertwined and buffeted by transnational forces.

Given the ecological, economic, and political odds stacked against Luis and Eduardo and their home place, I asked them if they still have hope.

Both men looked at each other and said, "There's always hope."

Monarchs swirled around us, seemingly without direction. But one of their migration's greatest marvels is

## Haynes

that they know exactly where to go to survive. From the vanishing milkweeds of Midwestern fields to the thinning firs of Mexican mountaintops, monarchs' movements embody not just their own will to live, though. They remind us of people striving to find their way in a North America where who belongs where is being redefined.