

# For a Family in Mexico, a Mission to Protect Monarchs

**Siblings Joel, Anayeli, and Patricio Moreno see the future of their community and that of the butterflies that migrate annually to the local Cerro Pelón forest as being intimately connected.**

By: Nicole Greenfield

*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*



*Monarchs near a tour group at Cerro Pelón, one of four sanctuaries in Mexico's Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. Credit: Peter Groenendijk/Alamy*

**UPDATE:** After an extended closure due to COVID-19, the Moreno family's JM Butterfly B&B reopened in November 2021 as the newly renamed Cerro Pelón Butterfly B&B, with siblings Joel and Anayeli at the helm. Joel and his brother, Patricio, also continue to raise awareness about threats to the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve through their nonprofit, *Butterflies & Their People*. This is especially important now as, in July 2022, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature added the North American population to its "Red List" of species threatened with extinction.

- 1 If there's something that the Moreno family agrees on, it's that monarch butterflies changed their lives. And not just their own but the lives of most in Macheros, Mexico. The agricultural village of 400 people sits at the entrance to Cerro Pelón, one of four sanctuaries in Mexico's Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, established by the federal government in 1986.

- 2 It started when Melquiades Moreno de Jesus secured a job as a forest ranger, or *guardabosque*, in 1982. The State of Mexico's Commission of Natural Parks and Wildlife (*Comisión Estatal de Parques Naturales y de la Fauna*, or *CEPANAF*) established the local forest ranger positions, employing men from Macheros to patrol the part of the sanctuary that's in the state of Mexico. (Part of the butterfly reserve also lies in the state of Michoacán.) CEPANAF hired Melquiades several years later and he stayed on, monitoring the butterflies and deterring illegal loggers, for more than three decades.



*The village of Macheros; Cerro Pelón is the tallest peak on the right. Credit: Ellen Sharp*

- 3 "When my dad got the job as a forest ranger, it changed our lives," says Joel Moreno Rojas, the fourth-born of Melquiades's 10 children. His father's steady income brought the family out of poverty and afforded the children the chance to go to school. It also instilled a sense of local pride and inspired his family's commitment to caring for the natural wonder at their doorstep.
- 4 Among the Moreno siblings, three have continued their father's legacy: Joel, Anayeli ("Ana"), and sixth-born Patricio ("Pato"). Pato took over Melquiades's forest ranger position after his dad's retirement in 2014. When the monarchs are roosting in Cerro Pelón, roughly from November to March, he spends many days near the overwintering colonies, monitoring them and asking visitors not to disturb the impressive clusters. The butterflies, which have migrated thousands of miles from the eastern part of the United States, are drawn to the oyamel canopy—which provides insulation and keeps out the elements—for their winter rest. "I love it," says the father of two. "It's the most marvellous thing that could have happened in my life to have a job like this."



*Pato Moreno at work in Cerro Pelón after a rainstorm. Credit: Ellen Sharp*

- 5 Being among hundreds of thousands of butterflies sparks such an intense emotional reaction that the Moreno siblings say it is impossible to name. When they do find the words, they describe experiencing the monarchs as powerful, beautiful, and emotional. Joel has seen visitors drop to their knees and pray or break out in tears when they first see the butterflies, who some locals believe are the souls of their ancestors, since the migrating monarchs arrive in Macheros right around the first of November, el Día de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead.
- 6 "As Mexicans, we should all be proud of the butterflies," Pato continues. "I'd like everyone to understand the value of the forest, because it helps us and it helps the butterflies."
- 7 Like his father did, Pato also works to deter illegal loggers, many of them jobless and poverty-stricken, who may chop down a single tree at a time to sell for commercial purposes, like construction. It's not easy to make ends meet in Macheros: Most people here earn less than 200 MXN, or \$9, a day by selling resin or tortillas, growing avocados or corn, driving taxis, weaving baskets, herding sheep, or cutting trees. The logging poses a grave threat to the migrating monarchs, which rely on an intact forest canopy to make it through the winter and are facing an extinction crisis due to a multitude of threats. Two decades ago, their population numbered almost one billion. But as use of the toxic weed killer glyphosate began to skyrocket in the United States, that number has [dropped an alarming 80 percent](#). Habitat loss on both sides of the border only makes matters worse.

- 8 For Joel, these challenges facing both the butterflies and his family's hometown were an opportunity. In 2012, he and his wife, Ellen Sharp, began welcoming guests to JM Butterfly B&B. It was the first business of its kind in Macheros, offering lodging, food (prepared by Joel's mother, Rosa, who runs the village restaurant), and tours (run and assisted by locals). Their international clientele is eager to experience the most natural and pristine—and the least touristy—of Mexico's four monarch butterfly sanctuaries.



*Joel Moreno in El Rosario, another one of the four sanctuaries in the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve.*

*Credit: Pato Moreno*

- 9 In the winter of 2019–2020, the business drew more than 1,000 visitors and directly paid about 20 community members, though dozens more benefitted. More than 80 people in Macheros, for example, were on a rotating list to rent their horses to tourists. Others sold souvenirs, drove taxis, did housekeeping, or worked at the restaurant. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region, it ground this activity to a halt. Now, with Cerro Pelón closed to visitors, there has been an uptick in illegal logging. Joel and Ellen hope that butterfly enthusiasts will consider offering support in the meantime by virtually adopting a monarch colony until in-person business can safely resume.
- 10 Thankfully, some of the jobs the couple has been able to create in the community fall outside the tourism industry. In 2017, they started a nonprofit, Butterflies and Their People, through which they've been able to hire six full-time forest guardians (not to be confused with the

CEPANAF-employed forest rangers like Pato). Three are residents of Macheros; three come from other Cerro Pelón—adjacent communities.

- 11 "It makes me feel good to make a difference for these families," says Joel, who'd spent 11 years in the United States before returning to his community. "They don't have to go to the forest to cut a tree. Instead, they are protecting the trees. And it's nice to see them happy when they see the butterflies."
- 12 The couple's mission is also shared by Anayeli Moreno, one of Melquiades's five daughters, who works full-time for the family business. Ana likes to say she first experienced the butterflies when she was in the womb because her pregnant mother would make the hour-long trip up the mountain on horseback to see them. At 10 years old, she remembers going with her mother to sell quesadillas to the butterfly tourists as they arrived by the busload. Until then, she had wanted to be a doctor. "But I changed my mind. I told my mom I wanted to study tourism—and I'm glad for that," she says. "Someone from this place, from this village, has to show the rest of the world what we have here."



*Ana Moreno in Cerro Pelón. Credit: Ellen Sharp*

- 13 Encouraged by her mother, Ana enrolled at the nearby Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, becoming one of the village's first college graduates. "We live in a very macho place, and usually women marry and have to stay home," she says. "My mom felt that we should be different. She said, 'You have to study. It's the only way we can change this place.' "
- 14 Ana has blazed another trail by becoming Cerro Pelón's first—and only—female butterfly guide. "You can see women in other sanctuaries, but not here—only men can go up to the mountain," she says, explaining that the ejido had long excluded women from participating in butterfly

tourism. "But now it seems like more girls are going to the university. And they want to be guides too."

- 15 As a guide for JM Butterfly B&B, Ana travels on horseback up the steep and narrow trails, climbing about 2,300 feet from the base of the mountain to reach the colonies. She works six days a week and jokes that she only takes one day off to do laundry. "It's really hard to explain the feelings you have when you see the butterflies," she says. "It's like you're in love."