

New York Teen Leads Global Movement to Protect Monarch Butterflies

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff



Cynthia (center) along with her RTR Summer Program students prepare to tag and release monarch butterflies./Courtesy Cynthia Zhang

- 1 Cynthia Zhang's passion for environmental conservation didn't start in a classroom or through a documentary—it started in a garden. While volunteering at a local community space on Long Island, she met a woman raising monarch butterflies and had the chance to witness their transformation up close. Holding a monarch in her hand and releasing it into the air sparked a curiosity that soon grew into action. Now 17, Cynthia is the founder of [Monarchs Matter](#), a youth-led nonprofit that uses the story of the monarch butterfly to educate and inspire communities to protect biodiversity.
- 2 What began as a personal project—raising and tagging butterflies at home—quickly became something bigger. Cynthia learned that monarch populations had plummeted by as much as [90% over the last two decades](#) in North America, due to habitat loss, pesticide use and climate change. Wanting to share the wonder she experienced and raise awareness about the butterfly's decline, she started Monarchs Matter in 2023 with a simple goal: to connect people to environmental issues in a hands-on, meaningful way.

- 3 At the heart of the organization is an "education-to-action" model. Cynthia believes that learning about environmental issues is important, but it's the action that follows that makes the real difference. Through summer programs, habitat restoration projects, community science and global webinars, Monarchs Matter gives people, especially youth, the tools to make a tangible impact.
- 4 Though Monarchs Matter launched just two years ago, its impact has been remarkable. Cynthia and her team have planted more than 21,000 trees in Mexico's Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, helping restore critical overwintering habitat. On Long Island, they've established 14 monarch waystations—vibrant gardens filled with native milkweed and nectar plants that provide essential breeding and feeding grounds for migrating monarchs. Spanning 28 acres, these waystations are now thriving at schools, churches, nature preserves and museums across the region.



Cynthia Zhang is the founder of Monarchs Matter, a nonprofit that empowers youth protect monarch butterflies through education, habitat restoration and advocacy./Courtesy Cynthia Zhang

- 5 But for Cynthia, the most meaningful impact isn't in the numbers—it's in the stories. She recalls one adult volunteer who told her, "You didn't just teach us what to do. You made us feel like what we did mattered." That same volunteer went on to build her own monarch waystation at home. Other participants have led butterfly releases at children's hospitals or started projects in their own neighborhoods.
- 6 "After the summer program, I sent a survey to the students, and reading their reflections was really powerful," Cynthia said. "Some had never done anything related to environmental conservation before, but they all said they felt inspired and empowered to keep taking action. That shift in mindset—that's what I think is most important."

- 7 Outreach for the program happens mostly through social media, school partnerships, and collaborations with local nonprofits like Rewild Long Island. Cynthia also developed a starter chapter initiative to help youth outside the U.S. take action in their own communities. In Pakistan, one chapter is building a rooftop garden to support the swallowtail butterfly, while in Nigeria, a group is planting native trees to reduce flooding and support pollinators.
- 8 Raju Rajan, founder and president of ReWild Long Island, has mentored Cynthia since the early days of her journey and watched her growth firsthand. "Cynthia is very mature in how she thinks, plans, and inspires others," said Raju. "She's thoughtful, creative and incredibly passionate. It's amazing that someone so young, in just a few years, went from knowing nothing about native plants to leading a global youth movement. She's so driven and hardworking. I'm always telling her—take a break, goof off, be a kid sometimes," he added.
- 9 Through it all, Cynthia continues to learn. She admits that launching a nonprofit as a high school student came with unexpected challenges. "I realized the hardest part wasn't building a website or getting funding—it was getting people to care," Cynthia said. "It's hard to change your lifestyle to something more sustainable because it takes time and energy that many people aren't ready to give. I've learned that my job is to help people find that inspiration and discover their own reason to care."
- 10 "People are often surprised to learn that something so beautiful and once common is now at risk of extinction—and that their future kids might not even get to see it," she said. "Connecting that to the broader biodiversity crisis helps people understand what's at stake and motivates them to get involved."



Cynthia (center) teaches Raise, Tag and Release (RTR) Summer Program students about the monarch butterfly life cycle during an outdoor session./Courtesy Cynthia Zhang

- 11 Volunteering has also changed Cynthia personally. She finds meaning in using her skills for a cause she believes in and often reflects on a Japanese concept called *ikigai*, which encourages people to pursue work that intersects what they love, what they're good at and what the world needs. "Volunteering has given me more happiness and motivation," Cynthia said. "When you use your passion to give back to the world, it helps you feel more fulfilled and find more meaning in what you do."
- 12 Looking ahead, Cynthia hopes to continue expanding *Monarchs Matter* while exploring ways to advocate for policy change, especially around sustainable landscaping. For now, she's focused on this summer's program, which will bring together 40 students and volunteers to learn, plant and protect.
- 13 Her advice to other young people hoping to make a difference? "Don't compare your journey to someone else's. Start with what excites you, and don't be afraid to grow from there." Because as Cynthia knows, change often begins with something small—like a butterfly in your hand.