

Partners in Butterfly Conservation

by Hillary Walker



Butterfly conservation often depends on plant conservation. The endangered Fender's blue butterfly depends for its survival on a rare plant, the Kincaid's lupine.
USFWS photo

When the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) and the Fish and Wildlife Service conceived of organizing the Butterfly Conservation Initiative (BFCI), it was, in many ways, a good idea because of the expertise that already existed within the conservation community as a whole. Several AZA zoos and aquariums have been committed to butterfly research, propagation, habitat protection, and public education for many years, and Service biologists have been responsible for butterfly recovery for nearly three decades. Much of this work has been done in concert with other conservation organizations dedicated to butterfly conservation and habitat protection. However, previous butterfly recovery efforts, while often significant, had yet to be organized under a common set of goals. "Disparate programs existed," says Dr. Michael Hutchins, Director/William Conway Chair for Conservation and Science at the AZA, "but we saw a great opportunity for coalition building."

Since 2001, BFCI has grown into an integrated network with an impressive toolbox of diverse skills. In addition to its 47 zoological facility members, the BFCI has attracted an impressive diversity of partners, including The Xerces Society, Environmental Defense, the National Wildlife Federation, the Service, and the AZA. Each bringing their own unique strengths to the table, these partners help shape and direct the future of the initiative.

The Xerces Society has long recognized the importance of butterflies and other invertebrates to ecosystems. Formed in 1971, the Society has worked for more than three decades on butterfly research and public education programs about

invertebrate conservation. "Butterflies and other invertebrates are the forgotten animals of the science and conservation world," says Xerces Society Executive Director Scott Hoffman Black. "[BFCI is an] extremely important partnership and very mission-oriented for us." The Xerces Society contributes both a long history of butterfly conservation action and strong leadership skills to the coalition. Xerces is contributing to the development of the BFCI strategic plan, which will help all of the partners work together, each utilizing their own strengths. They are also working on developing a matrix of needs that will serve as a roadmap for which species need assistance and what BFCI members and partners can do to aid their recovery. This "needs matrix" will pull together information on butterflies in every state in the union, as well as Canada. It will not focus solely on federally listed butterflies, but will also identify at-risk species before they need to be listed. The matrix will be a tremendous benefit to the AZA's initiative members, as the data will cover every region in which AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are located.

Environmental Defense is a nonprofit organization that works through science, business, and law to pursue environmental goals. While the Xerces Society has experience focusing solely on invertebrate causes, Environmental Defense has, for over 30 years, pursued a wide range of environmental issues—from pesticide use, to global warming to endangered species. "We have a long-standing interest in the conservation of endangered species," says Michael Bean, Chair of Environmental Defense's Wildlife program. "Because butterflies have seldom gotten the attention of



The ugly reality of extinction: Xerces blue butterflies now exist only as museum specimens. Through the Butterfly Conservation Initiative, other species may be spared this fate.

Photo © the Xerces Society

other larger or more charismatic species in conservation efforts, we wanted to be part of this effort.” With its extensive experience working with endangered species conservation, private landowners, and Endangered Species Act issues, Environmental Defense brings many assets to the BFCI. In fact, to encourage BFCI members to work with local private landowners on butterfly conservation, Environmental Defense has made available a competitive grant that will fund a BFCI member-initiated project that focuses on private land issues. “We hope to take advantage of the good will most zoos have with landowners in their communities to involve them in conservation” says Bean.

The National Wildlife Federation (NWF), a member-supported conservation

group, also hopes to join forces with AZA institutions to further the goals of BFCI. Prior to becoming a partner in the Initiative, NWF was involved in other programs that aided butterflies. “We are very concerned about pollinator declines,” says Dr. Gabriela Chavarria, Director of Policy for Wildlife Management for NWF. “We were interested in BFCI because it was species-specific.” Like Environmental Defense, NWF brings to the table policy experience, including work with the Endangered Species Act. It sits on BFCI’s policy board and hopes to be very active in the directions BFCI takes.

In addition, NWF is very active in education programs. Efforts like NWF’s Backyard Wildlife Habitat™ Program provide community outreach while creating new habitat for butterflies and

other animals. Accordingly, NWF staff members are great resources for education and outreach planning in BFCI. The NWF sees working in the coalition as a great opportunity to partner and share education resources with other members of the BFCI, including AZA member zoos and aquariums.

As a founding partner, the Service is an integral part of BFCI’s work. Without the recovery authority and expertise of Service biologists, BFCI’s efforts to support butterfly conservation would lack direction. By working with each Service region and the recovery teams charged with restoring threatened populations and habitat, BFCI members can contribute to priority projects. Opportunities abound for further collaborations between BFCI members and partners and Service.

In many ways, AZA sees its role in the BFCI as similar to its job with members: to facilitate and promote the work of its partners, in this case the many organizations that already do such vital work on behalf of endangered and threatened butterflies. Through its administrative role, the AZA has brought the strengths of its partners together and focused them toward the collective goal of butterfly conservation. AZA’s membership encompasses many institutions that have butterfly exhibits or ongoing research projects, have extensive knowledge about specific butterfly species, have access to butterfly habitat, or have experience getting volunteers from the community involved in conservation. One of the best things about butterfly conservation is that people can get directly involved in their own backyards.

From government agencies to butterfly experts to private landholders and gardeners to the smallest AZA-accredited member, everyone can help BFCI meet its goal of recovering not just currently endangered butterflies, but those that can be saved from ever landing on that list.

Hillary Walker is a Public Affairs Program Assistant for the AZA. This article is reprinted with permission from the AZA’s June 2003 Communiqué.