he Tribal Coalition Fighting to Save Monarch Butterflies

Habitat loss and climate change are decimating the species. What can the U.S. learn from Oklahoma tribes' efforts to restore their migratory path?

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Seventeen years ago, Jane Breckinridge came home. A citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation with a great-grandmother who was Euchee, Breckinridge had left Oklahoma after high school to attend Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she decided to stay after graduation. Some two decades later, she'd secured a good-paying job in publishing, working as a vice president on the business side of a magazine. She had a nice house in a pleasant neighborhood, an office in a shiny downtown Minneapolis building complete with a heated parking spot in the basement garage—the works. "And then I really just sort of chucked it all away to come live at the end of a dirt road," she said with a laugh.

In 2004, as her fortieth birthday approached, Breckinridge left her Minnesota life, took a reduced role at her magazine, and returned home

to Muscogee land. She moved back into her family home, located on the allotment parcel her family has held onto since her great-grandmother secured it in 1899. That was before Oklahoma was a state, when the region was known simply as Indian Territory. “I just got homesick,” Breckinridge said. “And I wanted to come back.” For the monarch butterflies, Jane’s return couldn’t have come at a better time.

Every winter, monarch butterflies across the northern corners of the continent fly south to the mountains of central Mexico. The migration pattern—which, for some, stretches over 3,000 miles—is a natural wonder, not replicated by any other butterfly in the world. Nobody knows how the monarchs’ homing system works; the butterflies that return to Mexico are often the great-grandchildren of those who made the trip the year before. Many of the winged creatures fly through Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas before plunging through Mexico. And, as has now been widely reported, many are dying before they can complete the full trip.

Monarchs cover the vegetation of their Mexican winter territory so densely that it’s easier to count them by area than insect-by-insect. Last week, researchers in Mexico announced that the

winter monarch population had dropped by 25 percent between 2019 and 2020, declining from 2.6 hectares to 2.1 hectares. In 2018, the monarchs covered 6.1 hectares. In the 1990s, they regularly covered 20 hectares. Something is going very wrong.

For those who have been observing and researching the monarchs for decades, like Dr. Chip Taylor, head of Monarch Watch at the University of Kansas, the numbers are troubling but not surprising. Taylor, who has been studying pollinators since 1969 and monarchs in particular since he started Monarch Watch in 1992, nearly predicted this year's drop on the nose—he estimated the postmigration numbers would clock in at 2 hectares flat; they came in at 2.1.

The issue, which he has documented extensively on Monarch Watch's blog and acknowledged in our conversation as being "pretty complex," is basically about food. Monarch butterflies have, for centuries, relied on milkweed and nectar plants—in Oklahoma and Kansas, this includes sunflowers, ironweed, coneflower, and a host of others—to fuel their journey up and down the continent. With no milkweed or nectar-rich options to restore their fat reserves, monarchs can't fly—and if they can't fly, they can't migrate or serve their role as pollinators. But

landowners often see milkweed as an annoying weed and remove it using herbicide. There is also the issue of reduction via overgrazing on cattle lands—which is a problem given that the butterflies' traditional path takes them through Oklahoma and Texas, two states that lead the nation both in terms of beef production and cattle population.

And then there's the weather. This year's already depleted flock is set to return through areas in Texas and Oklahoma that are still reeling from a catastrophic late-season winter storm. Taylor has spent the past week trying to coordinate with fellow scientists on the ground in South Texas, hoping to compile a detailed report of whether the soil underneath the snowpack has been frozen—if so, it means that much of the vegetation that monarchs rely on for rest and fat replenishment will have been killed, leaving the butterflies with nothing to fuel their return journey north.

"You can have great resources," Taylor said, referencing the needed plants along the migration path, "but if the weather kicks the daylights out of the population in March, you're just not going to have a good population at the end of the summer. [In 2019], it was easy to predict that the population was going to be down because we had the slowest migration that we've

ever seen—it was too hot in September, and then there was a drought in Texas. And we just knew that was a double whammy." Climate change, in Taylor's view, is going to make all of this a lot worse. The question is, what are humans doing to help?

Butterflies have never been far from Breckinridge. Her husband, David Bohlken, an economist by training, began raising them at his home in Minnesota nearly three decades ago, when he was in the Christmas tree business with his father. Butterfly farmers feed and raise the animals and then safely transport them to customers—typically zoos and museums for full-grown butterflies, though they also produce caterpillar kits for schools. When Breckinridge and Bohlken moved back to her family home on Muscogee—written in the tribe's language as Mvskoke—land, they built what would become the Euchee Butterfly Farm. The name was a nod to Breckinridge's great-grandmother, Neosho Parthena Brown, who, at 16 years old, became the first of what has now been five generations of Euchee women to oversee the 160-acre plot.

Breckinridge continued to work at her publishing job remotely, but she began to get more engaged

and interested in the notion of monarch conservation, leading her in 2013 to start the Natives Raising Natives project. The project focused on sustainable tribal butterfly farming, with special emphasis on youth education and outreach to local communities about the importance of the pollinators. The more she started to think about her work, though, the more she realized needed to be done.

That year, while attending a butterfly farming convention in San Antonio, Breckinridge listened to Taylor give a presentation on monarch conservation. She was impressed, noting that Taylor wasn't just an expert on the subject but an expert teacher, too. The kind who could explain complex migratory patterns in an engaging, accessible way. The kind the group she had been envisioning needed.

Monarch conservation, and the conservation of pollinators on the whole, has not been a priority for the United States until relatively recently. Monarch Watch blog posts written by Taylor as early as 2008 warned of the issue of deforestation in the butterflies' Mexico wintering grounds, and called for the U.S. to encourage and fund "milkweed restoration on private and public lands." The issue drew coverage from *The New York Times* in 2011, probing the explosion of herbicide overusage

and the introduction of nonnative “Roundup Ready” crops to the monarch’s migratory path. Yet in 2013, the federal or state funding, let alone the desire, to make widespread conservation efforts possible still did not exist.

As tribal nations and citizens have long had to do in the absence of U.S. governmental action, Breckinridge took the reins herself. After the convention, Breckinridge sent Taylor an email, asking for his help in creating a monarch migration trail through tribal lands in Oklahoma. Taylor agreed to lend a hand, but he warned Breckinridge that a “capacity issue” might arise.

“He said, ‘You don’t have the milkweed seed resources, you don’t have the nectar plant seed resources, you don’t have any of that locally sourced. And that’s how we do restoration work. You don’t have greenhouses or hoop houses that are willing to grow the seeds out in organic, pesticide-free environments. You don’t have anybody that’s done site preparation, you don’t have anybody that’s done a monarch conservation plan in your state,’” Breckinridge told me. “So that was just for starters.”

Breckenridge, undaunted, joined with Taylor to found Tribal Environmental Action for Monarchs, or TEAM. The idea was to create a

coalition among the tribal nations along the migratory path, which required a hefty organizing plan. TEAM also needed the funding to address the “capacity issue” Taylor had spoken of. And so began a years-long campaign of grant-writing and networking.

During one meeting with an official in the Creek Nation’s small-business development office, Breckinridge was introduced to a consultant with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who advised her to apply for a rural business enterprise grant. A few months later, that same consultant introduced Breckinridge to Dr. Carol Crouch, a Salish Kootenai citizen and Oklahoma’s state-tribal liaison for the USDA’s National Resources Conservation Service. The timing of their meeting was fortuitous—the Obama administration had just issued the June 2014 Pollinator Memorandum, which declared that “it is critical to expand Federal efforts and take new steps to reverse pollinator losses and help restore populations to healthy levels.”

Crouch, who Breckinridge says “has the chief of every tribe in the state on speed dial,” took Breckinridge under her wing. Along with her husband and her mother, Breckinridge spent three years driving across the state with Taylor, visiting any and all tribal communities that would have her. Crouch’s support offered the

legitimacy she needed to get TEAM's foot in the door. And on those trips, Taylor helped Breckinridge see the scope of the man-made problem.

"This was still very early, just trying to get support for a big grant and really forming the team," she said. "While Chip and I were driving around, he would kind of look out the window muttering, 'If I were a little monarch butterfly, where would I find something to eat?' And he kept on saying that and kind of muttering. And at first I thought, 'OK, this, this is a little bit eccentric, I've got this professor muttering while I'm driving.' But then I started looking at it the same way."

Bermuda grass as far as the eye could see. Entire ranges grazed down to the nub. Lawn after lawn of nonnative grasses, the product of over-normalized herbicide treatments. The casual but vast destruction of the monarch habitat was impossible to unsee, and it fueled Breckinridge's sense of urgency. By the end of that initial outreach phase, she had put over 30,000 miles on her car.

"Every time we were out there meeting with tribal leadership, if you say, 'The monarchs are in trouble, their numbers are plummeting,' they'd say, 'OK, what do we need to do?' It was

never ‘Why?’” Breckinridge said.
“Whereas among a lot of white folks and white agencies, people weren’t there yet in 2013. I think they are now. But back in 2013, 2014, they were just like, ‘No, we just got rid of the milkweed in our pastures. We’re so happy. Why bring it back?’”

This was how the initial TEAM coalition was built among the Muscogee (Creek), Chickasaw, Seminole, Osage, Citizen Potawatomi, Eastern Shawnee, and Miami tribal nations. A 2015 grant proposal written by Taylor landed TEAM $248,007 in funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. It was the last grant that Taylor helmed for TEAM; he has since taken on a consulting role, with Breckinridge assuming control of the organization’s funding.

Taylor jokingly says he has “created a monster,” lauding Breckinridge as an “extraordinary grant writer.” But as she immersed herself in grant-writing—“It’s still me and a lot of coffee,” Breckinridge said this week—she discovered that the discriminatory stigmas and roadblocks facing Native organizations are eerily similar to those facing tribal citizens.

“Most of the people who are evaluating our grants and rating and ranking them, they’ve

never been here before," Breckinridge said. "We got questions like, 'Are y'all living in teepees? Do you have shoes? Can you even read and write down there? Wait, you have oak trees, it's not all desert there?' The craziest questions—and I'm not kidding about the teepee one."

TEAM, now known as the Tribal Alliance for Pollinators, or TAP, is now a well-oiled, well-funded machine. In 2018, it secured $93,080 in grant funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and another $149,500 from the Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Resilience Program, per Tulsa World. The funding TAP has secured is being used to help tribal nations not just obtain the resources and materials necessary to build their own hoop houses and greenhouses and farming supplies, but send representatives to take part in hands-on training sessions with Monarch Watch and others, teaching community members skills needed to continue the work on their own.

While the state and federal governments have since begun the play catch-up, "the tribes were the first ones to get things going here and, to date, I think, still have planted more milkweeds back, they planted more nectar plants back, more acres of habitat restoration," Breckinridge said. According to the TAP website, the tribal coalition is responsible for planting 50,000

milkweeds and 30,000 native wildflowers, which stand in addition to the 142 seed types the collective now has stored at a seed bank at the Euchee Butterfly Farm.

TAP began with a handful of people deciding that tribal nations could, and should, step into the void the federal and state governments had left on monarch conservation. Now it's looking like it could be a model for conservation efforts far beyond a single species.

There's a reason TAP had to be a coalition of tribes, instead of an organization tied to a single tribal nation: It's extremely difficult to get organizations and federal agencies with limited budgets to take up a niche-but-important issue like monarch habitat restoration one tribal nation at a time. When it came to building that coalition, the Euchee farm's central location in the state—"two hours away from everything," Breckenridge said—helped.

"For instance, maybe the Citizen Potawatomi Nation can't get an expert on organic pest management and greenhouses to come in and speak to them," Breckinridge said. "But if TAP contacts the university and says, 'We're going to have 20 different tribes there, it's going to be 40 people, can you come in and present and provide

guidance on these issues?' we can get all sorts of really interesting people participating."

The TAP model—of tribal nations partnering with one another and with state and federal agencies—is one worth considering for a range of environmental and climate-related issues, not just monarch conservation. Breckinridge cited the Standing Rock protests as proof that "when we speak with one voice, it carries a lot further and louder than we did when we work singly." It's also been a crucial example of allowing tribal nations to engage and lead on issues, rather than having an outside organization, or more often the federal government, come in and dictate the terms of a project.

"The approach is not to tell people what to do but to provide them with an opportunity to learn and to take the mission up themselves," Taylor said. "Then we can help them implement whatever vision they have."

The model should likewise serve as a proof of what tribal sovereignty can be at its best. The very Mvskoke allotment lands that TAP started on, at Euchee Butterfly Farms, are part of the land that stood at the center of the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* Supreme Court case last summer. In *McGirt*, the high court declared that the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's reservation was still

intact, as Congress, despite using the Dawes Act and Curtis Act to privatize tribal lands and deconstruct tribal governments, failed to dissolve its 1868 treaty. (“I cried and cried,” Breckinridge said of the day the *McGirt* decision was handed down.) Where once the introduction and existence of allotment lands stood as a monument to the federal mission of assimilation, the land that Neosho Parthena Brown and her descendants clung to can be officially recognized as a part of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation reservation once more. Breckinridge’s work is an act of conservation, yes; it’s also a direct expression of the sovereignty that for so long has been denied to Indian Country.

Supporting threatened species with tribal-run initiatives can be a form of decolonization in action. As Breckinridge noted in our conversation, the message she heard from environmentalists and conservationists while living in the Twin Cities was almost entirely focused on leaving land and resources wild and untouched. But that is not how the land was prior to colonization, when Indigenous nations and communities across the country actively managed and stewarded their natural relatives. “Being a Native person, land is not something separate,” Breckinridge said. “We live here, we’re a part of it.”

TAP is not the first to attempt to organize monarch conservation, even if it was the first to do so in Indian Country. But the track records of state and federal conservation efforts are patchy, to say the least—hence the current state the butterflies and other pollinators find themselves in today. What TAP has managed to do, in just a few short years, is alter how tribal nations in Oklahoma view the lands they maintain control over. Tribal nations like the Eastern Shawnee have since published their plans for pollinator restoration programs. The Chickasaw Nation has created as efficient a milkweed planting program as exists in the nation. As Breckinridge said, the work has gone beyond being an issue of good policies and has taken on a sense of communal responsibility.

“Early on, during the first meetings of the TEAM coalition, every senior person from each tribe who was represented was asked, ‘Why are you doing this?’” Breckinridge said. “And everybody had different reasons. But Assistant Chief Lewis Johnson of Seminole Nation said, ‘We Seminole people were recently endangered ourselves. Now that the butterflies are in trouble, it’s our turn to lend a hand and help them out.’”

Breckinridge, who finally left her old magazine for good in the summer of 2020 to focus full-time on TAP, hasn’t taken a proper vacation day

in five years. She knows there's plenty more to be done. The tribal nations on their own can't be expected to account for the fact that climate change has already begun to drastically alter the monarchs' population numbers and migration patterns. What they can do, though, is continue to serve as guiding light for other inter-tribal organizations and for other governmental initiatives. One day, perhaps, the world will be filled with people who look out their windows and ask that same question Breckinridge and Taylor asked on their car rides: *If I were a little monarch butterfly, where would I find something to eat?*