

ENVIRONMENT

Monarch butterflies are being wiped out. These combat veterans are trying to save them.

Guardian Grange looks to provide a safety net for veterans while teaching them about conservation, sustainability and regenerative agriculture.



— Sebastian Schell, Joe Sarapochillo, former Navy SEAL Mark Matzeldelaflor and Ole Schell on Ole's ranch in Bolinas, Calif., on Sept. 12. Part of the 206-acre ranch is dedicated to a butterfly preserve.

Clara Mokri for NBC News

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By Denise Chow

When Mark Matzeldelaflor left the military more than a decade ago, he spent years searching for something that filled him with the same sense of purpose as being a Navy SEAL.

After serving a couple tours in Iraq, including as an elite sniper, he returned home and took up odd jobs – "just wandering and doing random stuff to make some money to pay the rent," he said. Then, on a whim, he said that he tried "magic mushrooms" for the first time with a friend and that the psychedelic awakened in him a new resolve.

"I just reconnected to nature and my past, where I was like a kid in the woods," Matzeldelaflor said. "And I realized there's so much healing in being outside in nature, getting your hands in the dirt and doing good work."

Last year, the 37-year-old turned that realization into a nonprofit organization called [Guardian Grange](#), which aims to use nature to [help veterans cope with trauma](#), post-traumatic stress disorder and other issues that come with transitioning back to civilian life.

"When you've been in a combat role, like myself, you get out and there's nothing that correlates," he said. "You have these abilities but there's no stepping stone to something else. And that can lead to all kinds of issues with drinking, self-medicating, suicides and all that stuff."





— "... I realized there's so much healing in being outside in nature, getting your hands in the dirt and doing good work," said Mark Matzeldelaflor, a former Navy SEAL and founder of Guardian Grange.

Clara Mokri for NBC News

The idea behind Guardian Grange is to not only provide a safety net for veterans, but to also teach them about conservation, sustainability and regenerative agriculture while leveraging skills honed over years in the military.

The organization currently has five core members and around 10 others who, Matzeldelaflor said, are ready to rotate among California-area projects as they come available.

One of the organization's first major initiatives is to help construct a preserve for Western monarch butterflies, a pollinator species that has been pushed to the brink of extinction in recent years due to habitat loss, pesticide use and [climate change](#).

Matzeldelaflor's demeanor is calm and unhurried, but he's clear-eyed in his mission to use nature and environmental projects to help people. He said he found that similar energy in Ole Schell, a 47-year-old filmmaker based in Bolinas, California, who came up with the idea to convert part of his 206-acre ranch into the so-called [West Marin Monarch Sanctuary](#).

Schell said his drive to help resuscitate the dwindling population of Western monarchs came from memories of growing up on the ranch and encountering hordes of the charismatic orange-and-black winged insects.

"When I was a little boy, you could go up to a eucalyptus tree and if you shook a branch, thousands of monarch butterflies would fly off," he said. "You could see hundreds of thousands of monarchs just filling the skies, but now you only see one or two a year. I wanted to do something to lure the butterflies back."



— Ole Schell visits livestock on his family's ranch in Bolinas, Calif., on Sept. 12. Clara Mokri for NBC News

Schell teamed up with the Xerces Society, a nonprofit organization that focuses on invertebrate conservation, to craft a plan for the property, known as Orville Schell Farms. Every year, the Xerces Society surveys the number of Western monarch butterflies wintering along the California coast. This year's count [recorded fewer than 2,000 butterflies](#), a precipitous drop from the 1980s, when millions of monarchs would be tallied in California as the insects migrated south each winter.

"For an insect population to fall below 2,000 is pretty dire," said Jessa Kay Cruz, a conservation specialist at the Xerces Society in Sacramento. "They've undergone about a 99.9 percent population decline in the past couple of decades."

In the West, warmer temperatures together with years of intense drought and severe wildfires – all things that are exacerbated by climate change – are transforming the land and reducing the

availability of plants that Western monarchs need to breed and fuel their long migratory journeys. The insects are also affected by the overuse of pesticides and habitat loss from agriculture and urban development.

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Cruz and her colleague Madeline Kangas conducted a site visit to Schell's ranch earlier this year and recommended more than a dozen types of native plants to fill the preserve. The list included western azalea, California aster, lilac verbena and other nectar plants that are beneficial for butterflies. The hope is that these pollinating plants, along with the blueberries, figs, passion fruit, pomegranates and apple trees that already grow at Orville Schell Farms, will attract monarchs and provide them with a safe overwintering site.

— Pollinating plants that will be added to the sanctuary. Clara Mokri for NBC News

— Joe Sarapochillo works the land. Clara Mokri for NBC News

While habitat degradation and climate change are wiping out some insect species, scientists have seen populations rebound when conditions stabilize, said Matt Forister, a professor of biology at the University of Nevada, Reno, who is not involved with the preserve in Bolinas.

"Insects are pretty good at taking advantage of any bit of land that isn't polluted or destroyed," he

said. "If we give them an inch, they'll take it."

As such, projects like Schell's monarch butterfly preserve can be enormously helpful for broader conservation efforts, he added.

"It should give the general public hope," Forister said. "People's actions in their backyards and municipal parks and greenways are important. Those can be very resilient places for insects."

This month, Matzeldelaflor and other members of Guardian Grange put in around 100 plants on Schell's ranch and helped build a fence to protect the sanctuary. The work was done on the weekend of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to honor service members like Matzeldelaflor and to support Guardian Grange's mission, Schell said.

— Matzeldelaflor works on the ranch. Clara Mokri for NBC News

He added that he intends to eventually expand the butterfly preserve, based on how the monarchs respond this winter and whether he can secure funding to keep up with the project. Schell said he also plans to continue working with Guardian Grange by hosting nature walks and

hikes through the property and educational sessions about the plants and native herbs that grow there.

"I wanted to use the land to do something good," Schell said. "This was something where we could do something for the environment, do something for butterflies and do something to better people's lives."

— A Monarch Preserve sign is mounted onto a shed at the ranch. Clara Mokri for NBC News

That undercurrent of environmentalism and social good runs in the family. Schell's father, Orville, acquired the land in Bolinas in the 1970s to run a free-range cattle ranch before the

health benefits of free-range farming were widely known. A former journalist and noted expert

on China, Orville now serves as director of the Center for U.S.-China Relations at the Asia Society and focuses much of his work on climate change.

And it was Schell's brother, Sebastian, who introduced him to Matzeldelaflor and Guardian Grange.

Matzeldelaflor said he's eager to see how Schell's monarch butterfly preserve evolves, adding that it's the kind of project that he hopes his organization can take part in all across the country. Through that work, Matzeldelaflor said he wants to foster connections between like-minded people and promote a greater appreciation for the natural environment.

"The biggest thing I've noticed about trauma and people going through the process of healing is that the strongest medicine is just being around other people," he said. "I want to create a space for healing, but even beyond that, the creation of better ways of life."

— In the West, warmer temperatures along with years of drought and severe wildfires are transforming the land and reducing the availability of plants that Western monarchs need to breed and fuel their long migratory journeys. [Clara Mokri for NBC News](#)

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