

## MONARCH BUTTERFLY POPULATION SURGES IN MEXICO

**MEXICO CITY:** The monarch butterfly population has soared in its Mexican winter sanctuary this season, marking a recovery for the threatened species that migrates across North America, officials said Friday.

The orange and black butterfly covered 4.01 hectares (9.9 acres) of pine and fir forest in the 2015-2016 season, more than tripling last year's figure of 1.13 hectares, Mexican, US and Canadian officials said. While researchers measure the population by the area it covers, it estimates that there were 140 million butterflies this year in the mountains of central Mexico.

But officials and conservationists warned that they must sustain their efforts or risk reversing this progress. "The area occupied by the monarchs in the Mexican sanctuaries has increased in the last two seasons, which suggests the start of a recovery of this butterfly," said Omar Vidal, Mexico office director for the World Wide Fund for Nature.

"It's very good news. At the same time, we can't lower our guard in any of the three countries and we must redouble our efforts to ensure this migratory phenomenon transcends this and the next generation."

The rebound comes after the population

hit an all-time low of 0.67 hectares in 2013-2014.

The decline has been blamed on illegal logging in their Mexican wintering grounds and the drop in milkweed on which they feed due to the use of pesticides in the United States and Canada. The butterflies travel more than 4,000 kilometers (2,500 miles) from Canada to spend the winter in a mountain reserve straddling the states of Mexico and Michoacan.

They usually arrive at their nesting ground between late October and early November and head back north in March. Alejandro del Mazo, the head of Mexico's office for protected areas, credited the recovery to the "great results" of the joint actions taken by the Mexican, US and Canadian governments to reverse the decline.

The goal, which follows a mandate given at a 2014 North American summit, is to increase the area to six hectares by 2020. This compares to a high of 18.19 hectares in 1996-1997.

### Plant milkweed

Dan Ashe, director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, said his country has restored

more than 100,000 hectares of fields without pesticides in the past year, with an investment of \$20 million.

"I am encouraged by the good news coming out of Mexico, an indication that we have the ability to save the North American monarch butterfly and with it one of the most remarkable wildlife migrations on the planet," Ashe said. "But there is much more we need to do and it will take a coordinated citizen effort on a scale never before seen." Ashe urged people across the region to help the butterfly thrive by planting milkweed, and reach the goal of having 250 million monarchs by 2020. "A simple stand of native milkweed can make every backyard, school, community center, city park and place of worship a haven for breeding or migrating monarchs, and together we can bring about the greatest citizen conservation victory of our generation," he said.

But Vidal of WWF warned that herbicides are still a major problem in the United States, along with illegal logging in Mexican sanctuaries. "The threats to the monarch remain and if they are not dealt with, if actions are not followed through, the migratory phenomenon won't recover," he said. — AFP



A kaleidoscope of monarch butterflies cling to tree branches, in the Piedra Herrada sanctuary, near Valle de Bravo, Mexico. Monarch butterflies have made a big comeback in their wintering grounds in Mexico, after suffering serious declines, investigators said Friday. — AP



Australia's flagship icebreaker Aurora Australis sailing from Australia's Mawson research station in Antarctica. The icebreaker that ran aground in Antarctica during a blizzard has been successfully refloated, officials said. — AFP

## AUSTRALIAN ICEBREAKER REFLOATED IN ANTARCTICA AFTER GROUNDING

### RESCUERS WORKING TO BRING VESSEL'S EXPEDITIONERS HOME

**SYDNEY:** An Australian icebreaker that ran aground in Antarctica during a blizzard has been refloated, officials said yesterday as they work to bring the vessel's expeditioners home.

The Aurora Australis ran aground with 68 people on board after breaking its moorings on Wednesday and was stuck on rocks at Horseshoe Harbour, close to Australia's Mawson station.

"The Aurora Australis was successfully refloated and is now out of Mawson harbour," director of the Australian Antarctic Division Nick Gales told reporters in Hobart. "It is going to remain in the vicinity of Mawson harbour for a few days while the P&O crew conduct a very thorough assessment of any damage that has occurred during the event."

"Importantly there is no evidence that any oil has been spilled or any pollution event has occurred," he added. The 37 expeditioners onboard were rescued by barge Friday and taken to Mawson station, while the crew remained to refloat the ship, which is owned by P&O Maritime Services, using its ballast system and work boats.

Shaun Deshommes, P&O Maritime's opera-

tions manager, said it would take up to three days to fully assess the damage to the boat's hull, including using underwater cameras.

"The breach is relatively small," he told reporters at a press conference with Gales, adding that only a small tank had been damaged. "It is not affecting in any manner the stability or the safety of the vessel." It is expected that the boat, which is capable of breaking ice up to 1.23 metres thick, will journey back to Australia for repairs.

### 'International jigsaw puzzle'

Gales said the Australian Antarctic Division was engaging with other Antarctic programmes on how to bring the expeditioners back to Australia. The United States Antarctic programme has already agreed to take more than 30 expeditioners from another of Australia's stations, Davis, to Casey station, some 1,500 kilometres (950 miles) away, by plane later yesterday.

That group had been scheduled to return to Australia on the Aurora Australis after a southern hemisphere summer in Antarctica. They are now expected to be flown home on an AAD plane in

the coming days. Gales said Australia would consider the assets of other countries active in the region-including France, the United States, South Africa, China and Japan-before deciding on the best option to bring the expeditioners at Mawson home.

Saying it was like an "international jigsaw puzzle", Gales said Australia would seek to minimise disruption to other nation's programmes.

"We really try and look for the most efficient and effective and safe way to respond to the situation that minimises impact on other programs as well as is able to give us the assistance we need," he said.

Australia's Environment Minister Greg Hunt thanked the "broader Antarctic community" for its help given the dangerous and hostile environment.

In a statement, Hunt also thanked "the many nations which have been quick to offer logistical support to the Australian Antarctic program". Several countries have territorial claims on Antarctica, viewed as a potential future source of huge mineral resources, although under a 1949 agreement the frozen continent is designated a scientific preserve. — AFP

## GLOBAL WARMING DOUBTS SPUR PUSH TO BLOCK SCIENCE NORMS

**CHARLESTON, W.Va.:** Doubt over man's contribution to global warming, particularly through burning coal for power, is fueling a push by West Virginia lawmakers to block new science standards in schools.

In a state defined by a coal industry that is now on life support, the Republican-led House of Delegates voted 73-20 on Friday to delay the new science standards related to Common Core.

Discussion on the measure Thursday focused on concerns, largely by coal proponents, that teaching the standards about global warming would follow a "political agenda" and an "ideology."

The vast majority of peer-reviewed studies, science organizations and climate scientists say global warming stems largely from manmade sources. A major source of carbon emissions is burning coal.

"In an energy-producing state, it's a concern to me that we are teaching our kids, potentially, that we are doing immoral things here in order to make a living in our state," said Del. Jim Butler, R-Mason.

The science standards, set to take effect July 1, would be blocked for at least a year and existing standards would remain in their place. The measure next heads to the GOP-controlled Senate, where the education chairman says he has no issue with the bill. "As it stands right now, I have no problems with it at all," said Sen. Dave Sypolt, R-Preston.

"I'm going to work it and send it right through." It's unclear how the full Senate would act on the proposal. In April 2015, the state Board of Education made some changes to the standards that global warming doubters favored; for example, adding

"natural forces" to the list of climate-change debate topics, which already included greenhouse gases; human changes in atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases; and relevant laws and treaties.

Climate change only appears in a handful of places in the standards. In one example, ninth-graders are tasked with analyzing "geoscience data and the results from the global climate models to make an evidence-based forecast of the current rate of global or regional climate change and associated future impacts to Earth systems."

The full bill passed Friday also would change standards for other subject areas. Experts appointed by the House speaker and Senate president would suggest new math and English standards to be put in place by the 2017-18 school year.

Last year, the Board of Education stripped its Common Core-related standards for math and English and replaced them. But some lawmakers say the new standards still resemble Common Core too closely.

Democratic Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin said the state shouldn't keep changing its educational standards year after year. He also criticized lawmakers for the change on the science standards. "Those are things that our educators should be making those decisions on, as opposed to somebody because of a belief they have," Tomblin said.

Some delegates said it would be dangerous to start limiting the information presented to students by blocking the science standards. "It's a bigger world than just West Virginia that many of these students are going to live in," said Del. Dave Perry, D-Fayette. — AP

## US PERFORMS ITS FIRST UTERUS TRANSPLANT

**WASHINGTON:** The United States has completed its first uterus transplant surgery, following on a technique already proven in Sweden that could help women suffering from infertility, the Cleveland Clinic said Thursday. The nine-hour surgery took place on February 24, and the 26-year-old patient-whose identity was not revealed-was in stable condition, the hospital said in a statement.

The transplanted uterus came from a deceased donor. More details about the surgery are expected during a press conference with the medical team to be scheduled next week in Cleveland, Ohio.

Late last year, Cleveland Clinic began enlisting candidates for uterine transplants as part of a clinical trial that aimed to offer the procedure to 10 women.

Women potentially eligible to receive a uterine transplant include those who suffer from an irreversible condition known as Uterine Factor Infertility (UFI), which affects between three and five percent of women worldwide, the hospital said.

Sweden's University of Gothenburg achieved its first birth via a transplanted uterus in September 2014. — AFP

## RULING MAY LEAVE LOUISIANA WITH ONE ABORTION CLINIC

**NEW ORLEANS:** Abortion services in Louisiana will be restricted to one clinic in New Orleans unless the US Supreme Court reverses an appellate court ruling, an abortion rights group said. On Wednesday, a ruling by the 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals allowed a Louisiana law to take effect that requires doctors providing abortions to have admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles.

Supporters say the law's provision requiring admitting privileges at area hospitals is meant to protect women's health. Opponents say it's meant to make it essentially impossible for women to get abortions and would do just that. The Center for Reproductive Rights, which is representing abortion clinics and doctors, said only one clinic in Louisiana would be able to provide abortions unless the Supreme Court reverses the ruling.

The center said the Women's Health Care Center in New Orleans will remain open because it has doctors with admitting privileges. But the group said two other two clinics - one in Baton Rouge and one in Bossier City - were forced to stop providing abortions Thursday. Meanwhile, a fourth clinic in Shreveport would have to stop providing abortions unless the Supreme Court stops Louisiana's law from going into effect, the group said. "The fourth clinic is hanging on by a thread, with one physician who will have to cease providing services unless we can get immediate relief from the Supreme Court," said David Brown, a staff lawyer with the

Center for Reproductive Rights.

A fifth clinic in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans, closed recently. Abortion clinics and their doctors sued Louisiana to block the law. In late January, US District Judge John deGravelles in Baton Rouge barred the state from enforcing that requirement, but his decision was overturned by the appellate court. The same appellate court in New Orleans allowed a similar law to go into effect in Texas last June. The Supreme Court is slated to hear arguments in the Texas case on March 2.

The clinics did not respond to messages seeking comment and confirmation of the status of abortion services at their facilities. "The effect (of the ruling) is proving devastating on women's ability to access safe and legal abortion services in Louisiana," Brown said.

Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Rebekah E. Gee said in a statement that the law now in effect ensures "facilities and physicians that perform abortions are operating in the safest manner possible and have ready access to emergency care." A violation carries a fine of up to \$4,000 and the loss of a clinic's license, she said. Doctors who perform an abortion without admitting privileges could also face licensing sanctions, she said.

Ruth Wisher, press secretary for Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry, said that "if abortion clinics are in compliance with the law, they may remain open." — AP

## SEAWORLD ACKNOWLEDGES PLANTING WORKER IN ANIMAL RIGHTS GROUP

**ORLANDO, Florida:** SeaWorld acknowledged that it sent its own workers to infiltrate an animal rights group which opposed the practices of the theme park. The development comes months after People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals accused a SeaWorld employee of trying to incite violence while posing as a fellow animal rights activist.

SeaWorld Entertainment CEO Joel Manby vowed Thursday to end the practice, but said that it had sent its employees to protect the safety of its employees and customers.

"We recognize the need to ensure that all of our security and other activities align with our core values and ethical standards," Manby said.

However, the company refused to say who had authorized the infiltration, how long it had been going on, or how many workers were used to infiltrate animal rights groups or other opponents. SeaWorld spokeswoman Aimee Jeansonne Becka cited the confidential nature of its security practices.

The employee at the center of the accusations by PETA, Paul McComb, is still employed by SeaWorld but working in another department, the company said Thursday. PETA said last summer that its own investigation

revealed that McComb, a human resource worker, attempted to incite protesters and had posted incendiary comments on social media while mas-

querading as an animal-rights activist since 2012.

PETA officials said Thursday that SeaWorld's refusal to fire McComb



This photo made in summer 2015 and provided by Jessica Waller shows a three-week-old baby lobster at Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences in East Boothbay, Maine. Her photograph won a National Science Foundation visual media award and also appears in the March/April 2016 edition of Popular Science. — AP

shows that it condones corporate spying. The group has been especially vocal in its criticism of SeaWorld since the 2013 documentary, "Blackfish," suggested the treatment of captive orcas provokes violent behavior. Park attendance dropped after the release of the documentary, which chronicled events at the park leading up to the death of a SeaWorld trainer in 2010.

"The tawdry orca sideshows and despicable spying tactics are sinking SeaWorld's ship," said Tracy Reiman, PETA's executive vice president.

SeaWorld could face civil, and even criminal, legal exposure depending on the information it obtained from McComb about PETA and what the company did with the information, said Sharon Sandeen, a law professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law in St Paul, Minnesota.

If any information SeaWorld got from McComb met the definition of a trade secret - it was secret, had value because it was secret and there was an effort by PETA to keep it secret - then PETA could have a claim of trade secret misappropriation, she said. "PETA would have to identify information that they said was misappropriated," Sandeen said. "They would have to show they had policies in place to keep the information secret." — AP