



Walla Walla inmates raise and release monarch butterflies

By **Josh Peterson**. Published Monday, September 23rd, 2013

Dozens of inmates at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla are raising and releasing hundreds of monarch butterflies for research.

Many inmates say this program has been life-changing.

They say working with the small butterflies has helped humanize them inside the prison, and they say it has given them a strong sense of satisfaction for helping others.

47-year-old Jerald Mackmer has been at the Walla Walla Penitentiary for five years for a robbery.

But today, he says he's a new man, thanks to a program at the prison that lets him raise and release butterflies.

"And it's changed my life completely" said Mackmer.

This morning, ten inmates released about 150 monarch butterflies into the sky, as part of a research project with Washington State University.

"I've done a lot of bad stuff in my life and this gives me something good to do, because not only are we helping ourselves, we're also helping the community and science by being able to learn something new and understand things" said Christopher Love, inmate.

40 inmates are part of the program.

Every day, a group of them spends about an hour raising caterpillars into butterflies.

"They come in as little tiny eggs, then they go to caterpillars, larger caterpillars, then they j-hook, then they change into a butterfly coming out of the cocoon" said Mackmer.

Inmates also tag each of the butterflies, as the goal of this research project is to find out where these iconic insects migrate to.

WSU associate professor David James is leading this project - he says monarch butterflies are declining in population.

"We want to know more about the butterfly in the Pacific Northwest so that we can better prepare for its conservation, to provide corridors of flowers perhaps for their migration in the autumn if we know where they're going" said James.

Inmates say even though today's release is a little bittersweet, the work is very fulfilling.

"This has helped me transfer back into society" said Mackmer.

This is the second year of this program.

Last year, researchers and inmates released about 2,600 butterflies.

This year, they'll release a total of about 2,000.

James says this project will need to continue for several more years before they can gather enough data to determine where the butterflies are migrating to.

Researchers are relying on the public to find these butterflies after they're released to see where they end up.

James says typically, they get about 1% recovery - meaning, for every 100 butterflies that are released, they'll get notified about one.



Inmates Release Butterflies

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