


A Transformative Project

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Coffee Creek inmates harvest leaves for Oregon Zoo's effort to save endangered butterflies



by: TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Coffee Creek Correctional Facility inmate Crystal Magana harvests blue violet leaves as Cassandra Maughan and Bridgette Lewis observe at the women's prison in Wilsonville.

The clouds locked out the sky while the chain link, barbed wire-lined fence locked in the grounds. Misty rain fell onto the property, the only thing allowed to enter the prison without permission. Women clad in navy T-shirts and dark blue denim stenciled with a bright orange "INMATE" on the back of their legs listened attentively to their instructions.

It's the first day of leaf harvesting for the crew, and everybody wants to do it right. Volunteers from the Oregon Zoo explained that one cup of early blue violet (*Viola adunca*) leaves need to be collected during this session. By August, the crew will be collecting 100 cups a week. In that cup, only tiny leaves are necessary, because they'll be fed to tiny caterpillars, which will eventually become Oregon Silverspot butterflies. But, as the caterpillars grow, the size of the harvested leaves will grow, too.

The endangered butterflies, which are native to the Oregon coast, are part of a restoration project through the zoo, which has partnered with Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. It is spearheaded by Chad Naugle, who has been in charge of all the prison's sustainability projects and recently received a Director's Award through the Oregon Department of Corrections for his efforts.



by: TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Blue violets sit on pallets to be delivered to Big Creek from the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.

“This is a project I’m extremely proud of,” he said.

As of November 2013, the violet plants have been growing at Coffee Creek, with a stint in Salem during the winter so they could be refrigerated at the proper temperature. Twice a week throughout the summer, zoo volunteers will come to collect the harvested leaves. Some plants will be used as food while the caterpillars grow, while others will be planted to restore the silverspot habitat in the Nestucca Wildlife Refuge.

“The Silverspot butterfly used to exist all along the coast, but there’s very little open prairie habitat left,” said Larkin Gunther, an education coordinator from the Institute for Applied Ecology. “The biggest part of what’s going on is the ladies at Coffee Creek are not only providing food while (the caterpillars) are growing, but also providing food once (the butterflies) are released.”

Since the restoration project began at the zoo in 1999, each year volunteers release about 1,500 butterflies back into their natural habitat. Programs like the one at Coffee Creek are an important and necessary part of this process.

“These programs are like our lives — getting a second chance,” said Crystal Magana, 33, an inmate who works with the plants in addition to the facility’s bee keeping program. “It’s life. (We) are creating the future.”

Magana’s sentiment was shared by Kim McEuen, who has been a butterfly keeper for the zoo for the last three years. Prior to that, McEuen was a veterinary technician, but found she often felt guilty about the animal research she had to do. Restoring the butterflies doesn’t give her any guilt at all.

“I feel like I have a purpose,” she said. “You’re raising an endangered animal. It’s rewarding.”



by: TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - The tiny blue violet leaf is the size inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility harvest for caterpillars at the Oregon Zoo.

The excitement about the program, whether from the volunteers, the staff or the inmates, is unwavering. Everyone involved with the project is just as passionate and dedicated as the next, and just as enthusiastic to share their knowledge and experiences. For the Coffee Creek crew, being involved in the project is a way to connect with nature again and feel like they're making a difference.

"I'm Native (American) and native spiritually, so being able to work with plants and dirt is a really big treat for me. I'm the person who yells at my friends for killing spiders," said Bridgette Lewis, 25, an inmate who has worked with the plants since November. "We're helping something that we're already destroying."

For Lewis and many of her fellow crew mates, opportunities like this are what they look forward to. When they call home, it's what they discuss. When they write letters, it's what they mention. More than one of the women said it's these programs and skills that will keep them from returning to a criminal lifestyle once they're released.

As the women group together around the plants and help each other snip off only the smallest leaves, a sense of teamwork and purpose is clear. It's easy to forget they're in custody, because that's not what this is about. It's about coming together for a common goal and seeing it through. That's what they're here for, and that's what they'll take with them.

Jennifer Bechtel, 28, an inmate at Coffee Creek who, like Lewis, has worked with the violet plants since the beginning, simplified it best.

"We're saving a whole species," she said. "That's pretty cool."



by: TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Carl Schaefer, a horticulture volunteer with the Oregon Zoo, watches as Coffee Creek Correctional Facility inmates Bridgette Lewis and Crystal Magana harvest the first blue violet leaves at the Hoop House at the women's prison in Wilsonville.

Quick facts

The Oregon Silverspot was listed as a threatened species in 1980 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

After years of population decrease, the Oregon Zoo began a restoration project in 1999. The Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle also participates in the program.

After female butterflies are collected from the Mt. Hebo area on the Oregon coast, they're taken to labs at the Oregon and Seattle zoos, where an egg collection and hatching process then occurs.

The larvae sleep for the winter and are awoken around Memorial Day.

They grow over the summer and are released into their natural habitats in August.



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