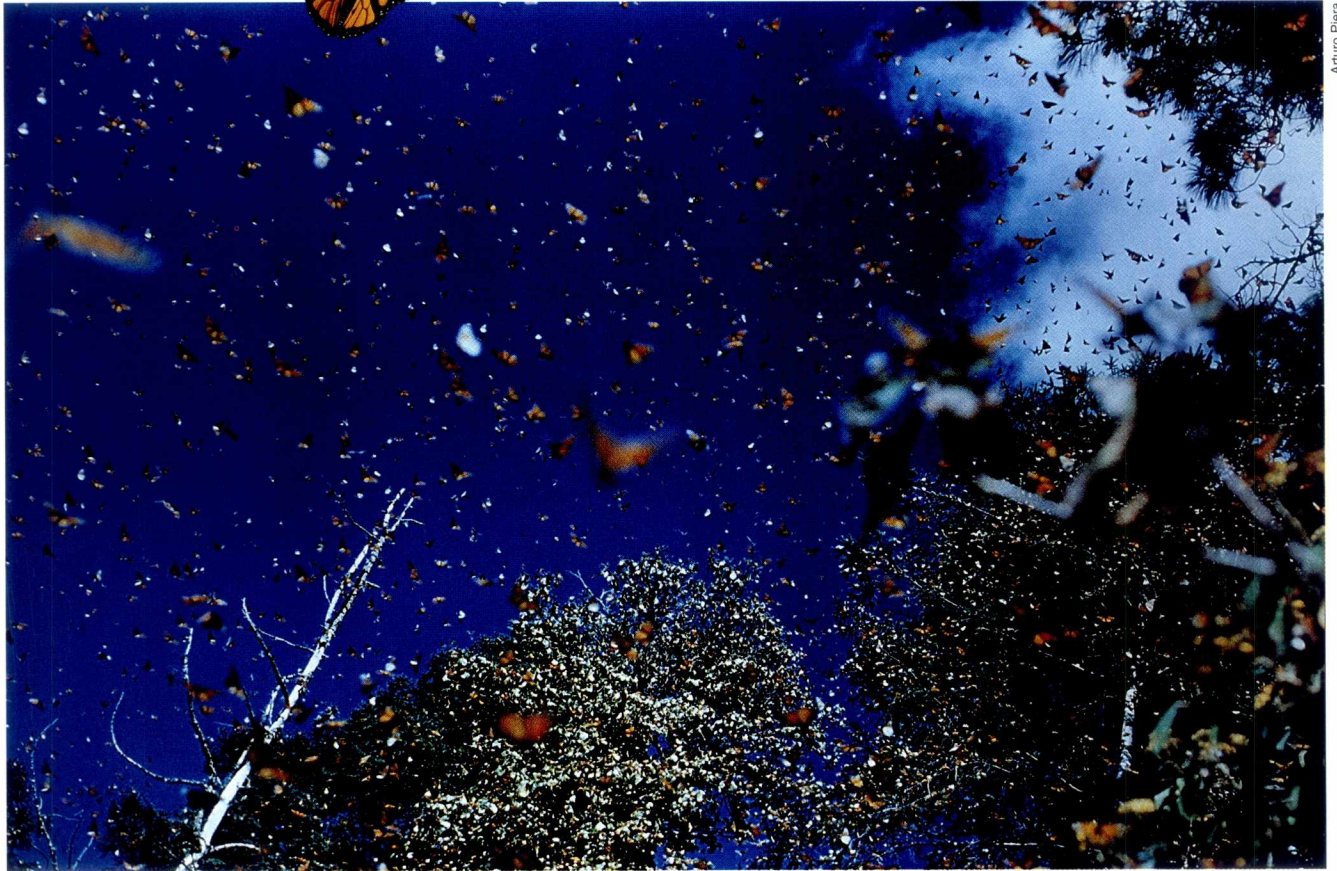




# The Monarch Butterfly

In the Magical World of Angangueo

*Carlos Hernández López\**



Arturo Piñera

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Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the warlike Aztecs tried to expand their realm by challenging the Purépecha nobles —the ancient inhabitants of what is today the Mexican state of Michoacán— to bloody battles in an attempt to seize their territory. Unfortunately for the Aztecs, they were always beaten. Their silent witnesses were the *papaloapan*, or "rivers of butterflies," that colored the sky orange and black.

Our ancestors associated them with beauty, love and flowers and affectionately called them *papalotl*. They also believed them to be the spirits of their forebears who were returning to be remembered since they begin to arrive in late October and come in waves of millions around November 1 and 2 when the Day of the Dead is celebrated.

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In 1937, Canadian zoologist Freud Urquhart, intrigued by the flight of the butterflies from Canada, began patient research to discover their destination. It was not until 38 years later that one of Urquhart's collaborators, Kenneth C.

Brugger, found the first refuge, in January 1975. Since then, the flights back and forth of the Monarch butterfly have been the subject of innumerable research projects, have been widely reported in the Mexican and international press and have attracted visitors from all over the world. The owners of the collective land,

or *ejido*, where the butterfly sanctuaries' forest are located, are now tour guides who can recite the law and recommendations for the conservation of the environment and the monarch butterfly, today considered a universal treasure.

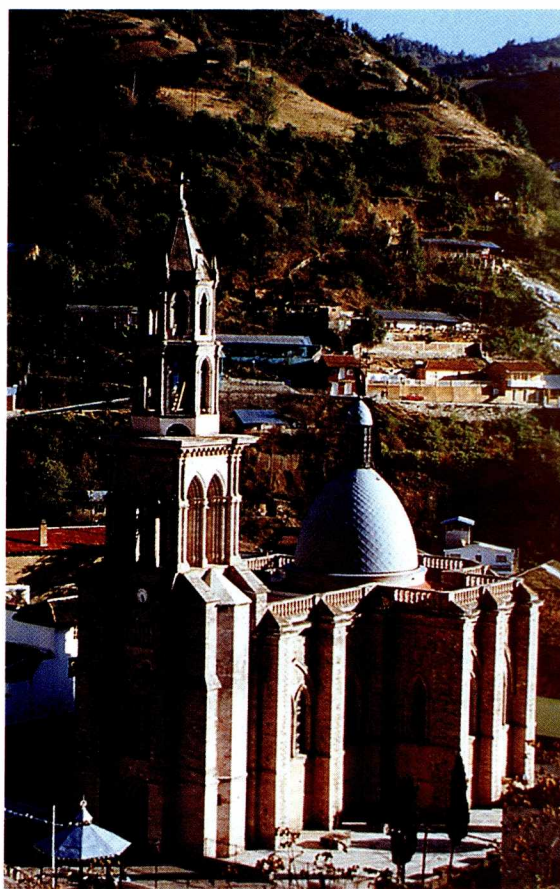
To visit the sanctuary of El Rosario, we recommend you arrive at the towns of

Angangueo or Ocampo and travel from there in a rented vehicle specially designed for dirt roads. If you get up early and arrive at the sanctuary between 9:00 and 9:30 a.m., you can watch thousands of butterflies awoken at the touch of the warmth of the sun's rays. As the sunlight caresses the clusters of butterflies, its warmth detaches them from the branches of the trees. As they fall, they begin a soft flight that adds their colors to the green of the forest and the blue of the sky.

The monarch butterfly and Angangueo have a relationship fluted with magic. Angangueo is a beautiful town of colorful facades and red tile roofs. An old mining town whose name means "at the entrance to a cave," it still boasts the entrances to three mine shafts, Catingón, El Carmen and Saint Hilario, where the miners entered

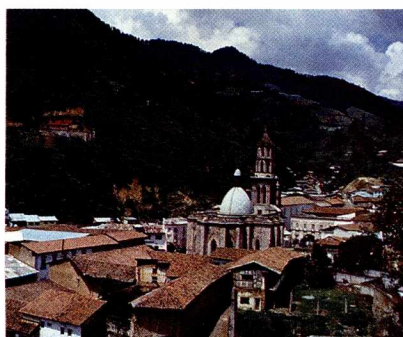
and left loaded with precious metals like gold and silver. Today, one of the tunnels has been restored so visitors can enter and examine the works of the mine. The tunnel begins at Parker House and ends at the Immaculate Conception Church, that dates from 1882 and is modeled after Paris' Notre Dame.

Across from the church in the portal of the plaza is the House of Crafts, with



Salvador Juárez Huilón

The Immaculate Conception church dates from 1882.



Angangueo, a beautiful town of colorful facades and red tile roofs.

\* Head of productivity and training at the state of Michoacán's House of Crafts.

Photos of Monarch butterflies are reprinted courtesy of the Dolores Olmedo Patiño Museum.

different items on display made by the able hands of the town's artisans: Christmas tree balls, embroidered napkins, different wood figures, silver jewelry and illustrations made with seeds, all decorated with monarch butterfly motifs. Visitors can also buy home-made preserves and fruit liqueurs typical of the region. The plaza itself has a fountain with a statue of the Three Graces where you can throw in a coin and make a wish.

Be sure not to miss the Parker House, a dwelling typical of the area left to the town by an executive of the American Smelting and Refining Company in the 1970s.

On the same street as the Parker House is a monument to the miner, affectionately called the *Mono* ("the big guy") by the townspeople, from where you can get a magnificent view of the whole village.

The town has three comfortable hotels: the Don Bruno, the oldest, is owned and operated by Don Juan, who has always made every effort to make his guests' stay a pleasant one. Further down the street is the recently built Margarita Hotel, with a kitchen that has delighted diners for six years. The third is the *Parakata* (which means "butterfly" in the Purépecha language) that occupies the old mining company offices and offers guests



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spacious cottages and gardens.

When entering Angangueo on the highway from Zitácuaro, you can stop at the mouth of the Saint Hilario Mine, which is still being worked and is a real attraction.

Angangueo is also well known for its fiestas. On May 3, to celebrate the Day of the Holy Cross, a candlelight procession goes down the main street toward the hill, and when they get to the top, the participants form a large cross. This tradition demands participants be in excellent physical condition because the climb is quite tiring. Other fiestas include June 11, the Day of the Miner, and October 28, the Day of Saint Simon, the town's patron saint. Since 1992, on different days each year during

the months of February, March and April, a cultural festival celebrates the monarch butterflies, both to honor them and to bid them farewell since the fiesta is held when they start their return trip to Canada.

The beginning of their 5,000-kilometer return voyage together with the fiesta is truly a marvelous spectacle, combining the flight of millions of butterflies with the confetti-covered townspeople who come out of their homes to say goodbye to them, secure in the knowledge that they will meet again soon. **MM**