Many heads are better than one...

In June 2002, the Butterfly Conservation Initiative (BFCI) sponsored the Karner Blue Butterfly Recovery Implementation Planning Workshop to further the recovery of the endangered Karner blue butterfly while introducing non-traditional partners to the recovery process. Sixty-seven wildlife biologists, university scientists, private landowners and zoo professionals met at the Toledo Zoo. This group represented 20 AZA institutions, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), state wildlife agencies, nature museums, universities, private landholders and non-governmental organizations such as the Nature Conservancy (TNC), the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and the Wildlife Habitat Council. Participants came from 14 states and two Canadian provinces.

The goal of BFCI is to support the recovery of the 22 federally listed butterfly species in the U.S., and increase public awareness of, and involvement in, butterfly conservation. The idea for the initiative arose during discussions between AZA and USFWS about how to position AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums as local community conservation centers. From these discussions, BFCI determined that the first priority was to demonstrate to more traditional recovery participants that zoos and aquariums also have skills, resources and interests that would greatly benefit the recovery process.
MAKING PROGRESS: SIX MONTHS LATER

Few things are as frustrating as meetings that raise hopes without producing results. We are pleased to report that the Karner Blue Butterfly (KBB) Workshop is exceeding our expectations and has led to several exciting partnerships. The following are a few examples of the exciting results:

“I cannot believe how engaging the community finds our butterfly conservation projects,” enthuses Seneca Park Zoo’s Jeff Wyatt. Dr. Wyatt met representatives from the NY Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and TNC’s Albany Pine Bush Preserve at the June meeting, among others. Since then, they have been working together to create a “Karner Kids” program where school children grow lupine (KBB host plants) in Rochester and harvest seed for distribution within the Preserve. NY DEC’s Kathy O’Brien sent seeds and TNC’s Neil Gifford sent the protocols to get the project started. The partners are now in regular contact, working with the USFWS and Mutual of Omaha to focus on meeting the state’s recovery priorities. Seneca Park Zoo is not limiting its support to Karner blues, but is also supporting projects targeting other local native species. The KBB Workshop was a crucial step in this process. “We would never have met these people had it not been for that meeting,” says Wyatt.

Roger Williams Park Zoo’s Dr. Lisa Dabek agrees. The June meeting has led to “all kinds of good consequences for the Zoo.” Zoo staff have begun working with the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, NWF and the Concord, NH school system to propagate and transplant lupine from greenhouses in Rhode Island to Karner habitat in New Hampshire. Staff members from four different departments have come together to work on one project. “This is the first time the horticulture department has been involved in field work,” says Dabek. In the future, the Zoo plans to partner with local schools, setting up lupine propagation programs for kids in Rhode Island. As Dabek notes, “This is such an easy way to get kids involved in regional conservation.”

In Michigan, zoos are taking a leadership role in assisting the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and others in implementing the education components of the Michigan Habitat Conservation Plan for Karner blues. A November 2002 meeting sparked by the John Ball Zoological Garden’s Norah Fletchall brought together experts from the DNR, TNC, Consumers Energy, zoos throughout the state and other organizations. Their goal was to increase public awareness about Karner blues in Michigan by developing educational materials for landowners and others whose support is essential to successful Karner blue butterfly recovery. “We’re keen on working with AZA on these sorts of issues,” says Michigan DNR Endangered Species Coordinator Pat Lederle. “It’s really important to focus our efforts in a broad community.”

The Toledo Zoo has plenty of experience cultivating partnerships with TNC, USFWS, Ohio DNR and other local groups working together to protect Karner blues. What’s the secret to their success? Just ask the Zoo’s Curator of Education, Mitch Magdich: “This isn’t just a working relationship, those guys are our friends.” Zoo staff and TNC managers spend time together outside the work environment so that their interactions aren’t just about the Karner blue project. “What we’ve developed is a two-way street where both groups benefit,” says Magdich. As all who participated in the workshop in Toledo could see, this connection has been to the great benefit of Karner blue butterflies.

THE BFCI: IT’S NOT JUST FOR KARNERS ANYMORE

Actually, it never was just for Karners. While the public face of the BFCI has focused largely on the Karner blue model, BFCI members have been contributing to butterfly conservation throughout North America. Woodland Park Zoo and the Oregon Zoo are leaders in Oregon silverspot recovery, while the Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden is active in monarch tagging and outreach efforts. Other institutions are educating thousands of visitors through butterfly exhibits, pollinator gardens and additional activities.

BFCI members are also exploring ideas for butterfly conservation events akin to International Migratory Bird Day. Central Florida Zoological Park hosts an annual event called “Wild About Florida” that reaches hundreds of teachers and Zoo visitors. Education Curator Sandi Linn is enthusiastic about what programs like this can do for public awareness of conservation issues. “Since these events are free to everyday Zoo visitors, we have an opportunity to open people’s eyes. This way, we’re not just preaching to the choir.” Programs like “Wild About Florida” provide a tremendous opportunity for zoos and aquariums to gain visibility and to contribute significantly to their local communities. AZA facilities interested in hosting butterfly-related events can learn from the staff at Central Florida Zoo, Woodland Park Zoo, Bronx Zoo, Calgary Zoo, Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden and others that have held similar activities with great success.

METAMORPHOSIS ON THE HORIZON

Soon, the Initiative will branch out in new directions. At press time, the BFCI included 43 AZA member participants, four partner organizations and connections to many more. A BFCI vision meeting in January 2003 will lay the groundwork for the Initiative structure, including the creation of a leadership committee. This committee will steer the BFCI into its next phases, looking to the membership for direction regarding next steps. BFCI partner The Xerces Society is taking the lead in developing a “needs matrix” database that will help inform the Initiative’s future recovery priorities. Potential activities include additional recovery implementation workshops similar to the one held for Karner blues, as well as programs supporting habitat restoration, butterfly gardening and exhibitry workshops. Look for updates in upcoming issues of Communiqué and on the AZA Web site.

Through the Butterfly Conservation Initiative and other efforts, AZA members are becoming known for their significant contributions to community conservation. Bringing people together to solve problems of mutual concern can be a powerful experience that will inspire your staff and visitors. Get in touch with the BFCI to see how you can benefit butterflies in your own backyard and change the world for the better.

For more information about the BFCI, contact Ruth Allard, BFCI Interim Coordinator: Rallard@aza.org; 301-562-0777 x 239.