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Los Angeles, CA, 3/25/2007

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Moorpark College hosts insect incubation

BY ERIC LEACH, Staff Writer

Article Last Updated: 03/24/2007 06:00:44 PM PDT

MOORPARK

With spring here, an effort to save one of the rarest butterflies in the world is getting a boost at Moorpark College, where students, faculty and other supporters are rallying to help the new butterfly breeding program.

"The females have been laying eggs for about two weeks now," said Jana Johnson, a part-time member of the biology faculty and a contract biologist for the Urban Wildlands Group, which is coordinating the rescue effort.

So far, the effort to save the Palos Verdes blue butterfly has been successful because so many people are helping, Johnson said, noting that 18 people are working on the project.

The late winter's dry, warm weather has presented a challenge because the butterflies need sun but can't get too hot, she said.

"We have really been fighting the hot, dry weather," she said. "We have a tarp up, a swamp cooler and we are feeding the butterflies by hand twice a day."

At Moorpark, the butterfly rescue effort is housed at America's Teaching Zoo, where students are trained for the college's Exotic Animal Training and Management program.

The Palos Verdes blue butterfly is one of the most endangered in the world and was actually feared extinct

after it had not been seen for more than 10 years. But it was rediscovered in 1994 feeding on locoweed and deerweed at the Department of Defense Fuel Support Point in San Pedro.

In 1994, there were only about 75 believed in existence, and since then biologists have

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been working with the Navy and the federal Defense Logistics Agency to help the

butterfly's population recover.

As a result, a few hundred are now believed to be living in the wild, with a stock this winter in San Pedro of about 600 dormant pupae.

For some time, said Army Major Jason Pike, an entomologist with the Defense Logistics Agency overseeing the project, biologists have wanted another breeding location, such as the one in Moorpark, as a backup.

"If we've got all our endangered species in one place, a fire could wipe them out," he said. "This is quite possibly the most endangered butterfly in the world."

Pupae were taken from San Pedro to Moorpark last month, and as spring arrived last week, the butterflies in Moorpark began emerging, breeding and producing eggs.

"They are obviously happy. We've had lots of breeding and lots of eggs," Johnson said. "Caterpillars are developing now that will become butterflies next spring."

Some of the butterflies will be taken to San Pedro to continue boosting the population there, she said, and some will used for more breeding next year in Moorpark.

"I'm ecstatic," Johnson said of the results so far. "I was a big ball of worry."

Travis Longcore, science director of the Urban Wildlands Group, said experiments are under way in Moorpark that will help refine the breeding techniques.

"We couldn't do this without the dedication of the students," he said.

What the students are learning from the butterflies might help some of them go on to help other endangered species, especially other endangered butterflies.

"It's very clear a lot of people are looking out for these little guys," Longcore said. "We couldn't have this number of butterflies without a lot of hands-on care."

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