

NABA Butterfly Park: Educational Outreach



Since opening its gates in 2004, NABA International Butterfly Park has been increasingly “spreading its wings” throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV). Whether it be hosting thousands of school students at the park during the school year, or making presentations to community members at schools, libraries, museums, and churches, or assisting cities, businesses and homeowners in establishing butterfly gardens, Park staff have been playing a key role in promoting butterfly conservation beyond the Park’s boundaries.

Raising Awareness and Broadening Understanding

A key component in the Educational Outreach program is a curriculum written by education coordinator Carol Goolsby, designed to take students through three steps: developing awareness, broadening understanding, and finally, taking action. Awareness of butterfly biology, morphology and speciation is accomplished through a variety of activities through which students rotate in small groups when they visit the park. All groups take turns touring the formal gardens with a park staff member who guides them to discover the variety of species at the park, butterfly behaviors, plant

by Carole Goolsby

features, and other elements of the ecosystem. While one group is touring the gardens, other students take 20 minute turns visiting a variety of learning centers. Butterfly Bingo, an identification game about LRGV butterflies, designed by Shelley Beville (former restoration ecologist for the Park), raises awareness of the wide variety of species that can be seen throughout the year at the Park. A science/art based “learning center” is set up for students to explore more close-up the features of caterpillars, the scales on butterflies (using microscopes), the shapes of chrysalids, and the intricate patterns and varieties of flowers and leaves (using magnifying lenses). Finally, students participate in at least one “interactive lesson”, which varies depending on their grade-level learning requirements. Pre-school and early elementary level students learn about butterfly biology, donning costumes as they “role-play” the various stages of the life cycle of a butterfly. Middle elementary grade levels focus on ecology, forming a class-size “food web” with giant 10-foot rubber bands, each student representing a different “necessary” member of the butterfly’s world. Emphasis is placed on the students’ ability to FEEL the “balance of nature,” and recognize the power which the last animal (the human, who has emerged from the middle) has over the entire ecosystem. Upper elementary and middle school students enter a “Time Machine,” in a floor mat activity designed to help broaden their understanding of the changes that have occurred in the ecology of the Lower Rio Grande Valley throughout its history. Emphasis in this lesson focuses more on the students themselves, rather than the butterflies — and the power that one person really has in making a difference in the preservation of nature.



Sue Still

Carole Goolsby leading an educational session about butterflies for a Lower Rio Grande Valley schoolgroup.

Taking Action

In October of 2005, Don Sands (one of Australia’s leading butterfly conservationists) visited NABA International Butterfly Park, and after passing through its formal gardens which were teaming with queens, fritillaries, sulphurs, and blues, he entered the forested gully, literally coated with emperors, snouts, heliconians, and skippers. He enthusiastically commented, “I don’t think I’ve seen this variety of species in one place since I was in the jungles of Papua New Guinea!!” Yet on the drive away from the park, his enthusiasm and excitement slowly drained from his face, as he looked out at fields of cleared agricultural land, and the developments of urbanized communities. He finally let out a sigh and said, “You know, you really need to have an island of habitat every three to five miles in the Valley for these populations of butterflies to be able to find one another, or I’m afraid these species won’t survive in the long-run.” From that point on, the educational outreach program at the park took on a new commitment — helping community members establish native butterfly gardens. Because elementary schools provided the perfect infrastructure needed to house an “island of habitat every 3-5 miles,” NABA Park staff began assisting with the design and planting of butterfly gardens on school campuses.

Jump-started by a grant from the Rio Grande Regional Hospital, in the Fall of 2005, the first six school gardens were in place by the Spring of 2006. Within a year, 4 more schools, a church, and the City of South Padre Island had solicited the park’s help in establishing butterfly gardens. Due to this outreach program, over 1200 community members in a 100 mile stretch from Sullivan City down to South Padre Island, have put their hands in the soil, and taken action in planting over 2000 plants of more than 60 native species, that today are hosting scores of native butterflies.

Spreading our Wings

Beyond the Butterfly Park, beyond the NABA organization, lies the key to butterfly conservation—the South Texas community. For it is the wider community that will determine the fate of the few remaining native plant communities that are needed sustain our rich diversity of butterflies. It is the wider community who will individually choose what to plant in their own urban landscapes. Without them, NABA’s mission can not be fully served. A commitment to spreading our message into any niche in this wider community in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, is as much a part of the Butterfly Park’s goals, as planting plants or hosting visitors to the park itself. 