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Declining species is a huge red flag

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by Kim Eierman

What happened to the Monarch butterfly this year?

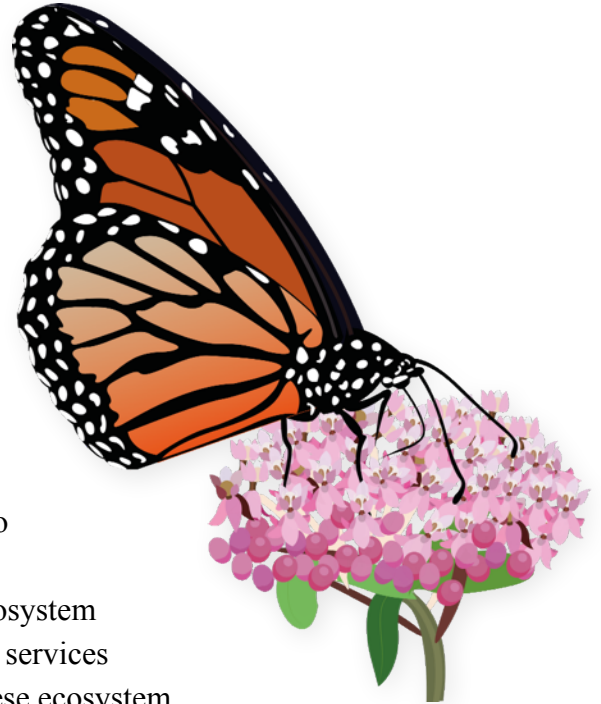
Monarch butterflies are the tip of the ecological iceberg, and there are many sinking ships. The Monarch population has declined to the lowest level ever recorded, bees are in a well-reported nose dive, the 20 most common bird species have declined by 68 percent in the past 45 years and one-third of amphibian species in the U.S. are imperiled. What does this all mean for us humans, the one species that all other species could exist without?

It turns out that we need other species, and lots of them, to maintain healthy ecosystems upon which we depend. Significant species decline is a red flag for diminished ecosystem health and that means a loss in ecosystem services - those services provided by nature that humans depend upon. We take these ecosystem services for granted, seldom realizing that our species cannot exist without them.

Clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, food to eat, protection from climate extremes and flooding events - these are just some of the services that healthy ecosystems provide. Humans simply cannot survive without them.

So what can we do locally to protect the species around us, and by doing so, protect ourselves? Quite a lot actually, but we must think differently and act differently. We are all part of the ecosystems around us and we can take action by healing our own landscapes. Simple steps like reducing our lawns and introducing multiple layers of regionally native plants can go a long way toward helping threatened species.

Many of our traditional gardening and landscaping practices are quite damaging to ecosystems - our large (sterile) lawns, our neat and tidy (leafless, infertile) yards, our emphasis on exotic (non-native) plants and even our fear of insects (most of which are beneficial), have sent our local ecosystems into a tailspin. If we want to save Monarchs, we must plant the native Milkweeds that their caterpillars rely upon, in lieu of Asian Butterfly Bush - which no caterpillar can utilize. If we want to ensure our food safety, we





must support bees with nectar and pollen producing plants that bees need throughout their active seasons, and we must eliminate, or at least dramatically reduce, pesticide use in every landscape.

It is time to think differently and landscape differently - our ecosystems, which include us, depend upon it for survival. Every landscape matters, every plant choice matters. Each and every one of us can make a difference in every Lower Hudson Valley landscape.

Westchester County recently hosted a workshop on these and other issues. It's good to know that environmentally sound landscapes are getting on the radar.

The writer is founder of EcoBeneficial!, a horticulture communications and consulting company, and an environmental horticulturist who teaches at the New York Botanical Garden, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, The Native Plant Center and other institutions.