

# MAZAHUA PROJECT REPORT MEXICO 2022/23



THE CULTURAL  
SANCTUARIES  
FOUNDATION



## PROJECT SUMMARY

This project is designed to support the Mazahua community living in the buffer zone to the UNESCO Monarch Butterfly Reserve in Michoacan, Mexico. The local culture and language are as endangered as the butterflies and the forest that should protect them. It is a perversity that the very place world-famous for a migration, that of the Monarch, sees a reverse migration: that of young men who risk their lives by trying to cross the US border for lack of jobs and opportunity. We will build a community center to protect, promote and celebrate the Mazahua culture and language of Crescencio Morales and the nearby 3 towns and, in doing so, we will bring economic opportunities and we will promote the vital conservation efforts protecting the local forest and the Monarch butterflies.

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# THE LOCAL BIODIVERSITY AND THE LOCAL CULTURE ARE ENDANGERED



Crescencio Morales sits at the center of four Mazahuan villages, drawn together by cultural identity and pride and also by their proximity to the world-famous Monarch Butterfly Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It lies in a 15 mile thick buffer zone around the 56,000 hectare reserve.

More than a billion Monarch butterflies migrate down from Canada and the US, from both sides of the Rockies, to winter in Michoacan. It is the greatest butterfly migration on earth.

It is still a mystery as to how they know where to come, not least as the butterflies that begin the journey have never done so before. Four generations die and are born en route. It is the great grandchildren of the butterflies that start the journey that complete it and arrive back in the North in the Spring. They cover the trees like a moving orange quilt and it is only when their bodies are warmed by the morning sun that the quilt begins to come alive and thousands of millions of butterflies take to the air. To see it is the experience of a lifetime. See more on page 4.

But the butterflies are under duress. The forest in which they seek their winter refuge is being cut down and diminished and climate change is literally changing the seasons. The butterflies now arrive later and leave earlier. Last winter, millions died in one night. See more on page 5.

In July of 2022, the Monarchs were officially added to the endangered species Red List by the International Union for Conservation and Nature. One community member that we talked to told us somberly that he did not think that there would be enough of the forest left in 5 years' time to support the wintering of the butterflies at all.

So too the culture and language of the Mazahua, one of Mexico's oldest indigenous groups, are endangered. Climate change and deforestation threaten both.

The Mazahua face high unemployment and the youth leave for the nearby cities or to try their hand at emigrating to the US and Canada - legally or illegally. Local crafts and traditional knowledge are fading and the Mazahua language is increasingly not seen as relevant to many of the community.

As always, everything is connected. This is one vital, interconnected, interdependent ecosystem. The Mazahua community is ready and willing to help to protect their forest. Indeed, they are already trying to do so, against sometimes overwhelming odds.

## THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY MIGRATION

“When Sunni and I made our first visit to Michoacan, we excitedly waited for a ride to El Rosario, the largest of the public butterfly sanctuaries. It would be an understatement to say that we were unprepared for what we saw. Pathways of flying butterflies in swirling orange and black clouds so dense they literally took your breath away. The same instinct that prevents you from breathing when you put your face in water can kick in when thousands of butterflies swirl around your face. The trees themselves were completely covered in butterflies from the top to the bottom, branches and trunks nothing but shimmering beautiful butterflies. Standing at the feet of evenly spaced ancient oyamel fir trees brought to life by millions of fluttering butterflies easily put any man-made cathedral to shame.... The forests of Mexico boasted a billion butterflies, over 550 tons, blanketing the boughs of the trees.

The magic of the phenomenon cannot be overstated. Imagine a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis somewhere in Southern Canada during the late summer months. That butterfly would be in reproductive diapause, meaning that it will not be reproductively active during this time. Instead, all its energy is poured into an extended life that will allow it to fly south for up to three thousand miles until it arrives at the oyamel fir forests high in the mountains of Central Mexico. Other monarchs from all across eastern North American join

it along its route until they all arrive in Mexico, one billion strong. It is not just that all these butterflies get to the same place, but they all get there at the same time. Within weeks of each other, they all gather in the forest. To make this even more remarkable, these butterflies have never been to this forest before or even to Mexico, and neither have their parents, their grandparents or their great-grandparents.

Here they spend the winter wrapped in the protective cloak of the ancient oyamel fir forest. As Spring approaches, the butterflies slowly warm up. Those that survived the thousands of miles of flying and the long, frigid winter, are dehydrated and hungry. By late February, butterflies are pouring in and out of the roost trees, searching for water and nectar to replenish themselves. At the same time, they abandon sexual diapause. The males pursue the females and they begin to mate. There is no native milkweed in the mountains, and the butterflies will use up the last bits of their energy to fly North to the nearest milkweed where they will lay their eggs and most will die. The offspring continue the mating and journey North until, two or three generations later, the monarch is redistributed across North America. Then it all starts again.”

Extract from *'On the Wings of the Condor'* by Bill Toone, founder of our project partner ECOLIFE CONSERVATION



## THE THREAT TO THE MONARCH BUTTERFLIES

“On January 13, 2002, when I arrived to visit the butterflies at El Rosario, my Mexican colleagues were somber. Beyond that, they gave no indication of what I was about to see. We wandered into the forest. I was struck by how many dead butterflies I saw, but there were always dead butterflies in the reserves. This turned out to be different. As we went deeper into the forest, things changed quickly. We saw tens of thousands of dead butterflies, then hundreds of thousands, then millions, then tens of millions, then hundreds of millions. Sounds of the forest were muffled but for the noise of the crunching of wings underfoot. The floor of the forest was thickly carpeted with carcasses of millions upon millions of monarchs, victims of a freeze turned deadly thanks to the destruction of the protective forest. It was no wonder that my colleagues were silent. Nothing could have prepared us for what we saw: dead butterflies laying up to thirty inches

deep at the roots of the fir trees, like orange and black snow.

On January 11, a cold, wet storm had swept the mountains. Freezing rain followed by strong winds blowing through the holes in the forest blanket took their toll on the sleeping monarchs. An estimated 270 million monarch butterflies – about 25% of the migratory population of the eastern monarch butterfly – had died in one night.

That winter, El Rosario earned a new nickname from locals. Someone even decided to re-sign the reserve entry sign with it. They took a piece of charcoal, drew a rough black cross through “El Rosario” and wrote the new name beneath it. “El Cementerio.””

Extract from *‘On the Wings of the Condor’* by Bill Toone, founder of our project partner ECOLIFE CONSERVATION

# MAZAHUA LANGUAGE



The Mazahua language is highly endangered and is likely slowly to die out if not supported.

Many of those that we spoke to who are in their 40s, 50s and 60s told us that they had been encouraged by their own parents not to speak the language for fear of discrimination. Exacerbating this was the fact that most school teachers spoke only in Spanish and did not understand or speak Mazahua. (Even now, only pre-kindergarten kids are taught in Mazahua.)

As a result, that generation has not encouraged their own children to continue to speak Mazahua. The younger generation simply stopped using Mazahua either at home or at school and Spanish has become more and more ubiquitous.

The estimates that we were given as to the number of fluent speakers in the community ranged but there seemed to be a consensus that about 40% of Mazahua adults in the area now speak Mazahua,

down from 90% some 40 or 50 years ago. Of those under 35, we were told that as few as 10% speak the language.

The more encouraging news was that the community, and in particular the youngsters, really want to bring the language back. They don't want it to become irrelevant or fade away. At the moment, they simply don't have the means or the infrastructure (in terms of teachers, books, materials, a classroom...) to support its renaissance. No longer is there any fear of discrimination. Now the only obstacle is resources.

More than 100 Crescencio youngsters, including Cristian Amador Medina Guzman who is co-leading our community project team, are currently, entirely out of their own initiative, learning to speak Mazahua but, to do so, they must travel in the evenings after work or school and drive to the community college in the nearby town of Zitacuaro. We were assured that many more students would sign up for lessons if there was a classroom in town and the resources to support it.



As part of the proposed project, we will create a classroom for lessons in the Casa de Cultura, we will pay for the hours of a

local Mazahua teacher(s) and we will help provide materials including copies of a Mazahua dictionary.

## WHAT REPRESENTS MAZAHUA CULTURE - KEYWORDS

In every interview, we asked those that we met what Mazahua culture means to them. The consensus is that it is made up of:

A sense simply of being Mazahuan

Pride

The Mazahua language

Weaving

Basketware

Song and music

Dance

The local food

The forest and the Monarch butterflies

Herbs, pine sap and traditional medicine





# THE LOCAL ECONOMY

The economy is largely made up of:

- Timber industry – legal and illegal logging
- Avocado farming
- Weaving, basketware and other artefacts
- Other agriculture

Unemployment levels are very high and all of those that we met were very focused on the need to create more opportunities if the young are not to leave for jobs in other cities or to try to get to the US, legally or illegally.

It is a perversity that the very place world-famous for a migration – that of the Monarch butterfly – sees a reverse migration – that of young men who risk their lives by trying to cross the US border. The cultural erosion that results is as real as the erosion of the forest.

It should also be noted that there is a clear tension between the local economy and conservation of the forest and the butterflies. Deforestation is being driven by legal and illegal logging to clear land for agricultural purposes and also for timber for construction. It is one of the

only ways to make money in the area and compensation schemes introduced by the Mexican government have been insufficient and ineffective in halting the logging. We were told that they are “simply absurd” – in attempting to pay a farmer who can earn 120 pesos per day from his farm not to farm with an offer of just 800 pesos per hectare per year! We were also told that the federal government’s attempt to offer 3 pesos for every newly planted tree failed when corruption meant that five sixths of the payment disappeared such that only 50 cents would ever reach the hands of the farmer planting a tree.

The simple maths is that it is currently more profitable to cut down a tree than to keep it standing.

The deforestation threat is greatest in the buffer zone to the Monarch reserve but its borders are not secure and illegal logging is not uncommon within the UNECSO protected area itself too.

The people of Crescencio are largely on the side of the forest and the butterflies – to the extent that they organise armed patrols at the entrances to town to prevent anyone from cutting down their local forest. See more on page 11.

# TOURISM POTENTIAL



There is currently no tourism at all in Crescencio and the nearby Mazahua villages.

A huge amount of tourism does of course come to the area – drawn by the butterflies – but it is limited to the UNESCO reserve area and people tend to come just to see the butterflies and then go again. There is also a limited tourism season – linked to the four months that the butterflies winter in Michoacan. The season is getting shorter

and shorter with climate change, with the butterflies arriving later and leaving earlier than in previous decades.

A cultural center will add a second draw for visitors – giving a rich introduction to Mazahua culture, handicrafts and traditions. It would be extremely welcome to the community – and, in all likelihood, to local hotels and tour agents trying to find other things with which to interest and engage visitors.

# PROTECTING THE FOREST AND CARTEL ACTIVITY



Two cartels operate in the Mazahua area – focused respectively on commercial logging and avocado farming, as well as inevitably on drugs. The community of Crescencio Morales has responded by organising groups of volunteers who form armed road blocks at two of the three routes into the town to stop anyone coming in with logging equipment or out with timber.

The local people are literally protecting their forest and the butterflies with guns.

We should add that we are not sure how having two and not three road blocks creates an effective perimeter or deterrent but we are assured that it does.

We are also assured in the strongest terms that the cartels will have no interest at all in our work and are also not interested in ECOLIFE's work. They will not see our project as in any way a threat and will simply leave us and the community center alone.

## PROJECT DETAILS

Our project's objective is to help protect the Mazahua culture both for its own sake and as an underpinning of local conservation.

We will build a Casa de Cultura - a cultural community center - in Crescencio Morales to help the Mazahuan community protect its culture and language. The community center will act as the focal point for cultural and language revitalization. It will help to create jobs and it will promote pride. It will be a gathering place for the Mazahua (none currently exists). It will house workshops for the Mazahua language, textiles, basket weaving, dancing and cooking. It will include a botanical and herbal medicine garden to help protect the traditional knowledge of the forest. It will encompass a technology center where storytelling, photography and video skills can be learnt by the local youngsters. It will be a welcome draw for much needed tourists (for whom the village is not currently a destination spot). It will also act as a hub for local conservation and reforestation. See more on page 14.

We are partnering, and have signed a project MoU, with the Mazahua community in Crescencio Morales. The community has formally agreed to contribute the land and an existing building (and adjoining garden) for renovation into a flourishing and effective Casa de Cultura. See page 16.

We are also partnering with ECOLIFE Conservation, an organization which has been working highly successfully with the community for the last 18 years to replace wood stoves in Crescencio Morales and all the other towns in the Monarch buffer zone to reduce timber use and to promote community health. See page 18.

Architecture designs for the renovation are complete (see page 16) and we are currently awaiting quotes from prospective local building teams. We hope that the Casa de Cultura will be up and running by the end of 2023.

Overall, while we will be in charge of implementation of the project and will oversee and support it into the future, once the Casa de Cultura is built and operational and the project up and running successfully, it will be the Mazahua community that will take the lead and run the center going forward. The community understands fully that the ultimate success of the Casa de Cultura will be up to them. They will run it and they will need to bring time, energy and entrepreneurship. They will need to support it and encourage others to do so. We are confident that they will do so.

# THE NEED FOR A MAZAHUA CULTURAL COMMUNITY CENTER

Those that we interviewed were unanimous in their support for the creation of a cultural community center.

The reasons given for the need for a cultural center included that:

- no such center exists and there is no central hub or focus for cultural protection
- there has recently been a lot of discussion among the community about the need for a community center
- the pride of the Mazahua people in their culture is palpable
- their sense that it is being lost is equally strong
- it would be an important gathering place for the community and would serve to demonstrate the importance of the Mazahua culture and language to local kids and youngsters
- the community needs a local classroom for Mazahua language teaching if people are not to have to go to the nearby town of Zitacuaro for the only available lessons
- it will highlight the link between the communities, forest conservation and health and the Monarch butterflies
- it will underpin and expand local reforestation and conservation efforts
- it will galvanise the community's desire to create a Mazahuan dictionary specific to the local dialect, a Mazahuan cultural logo or flag and an annual Mazahuan festival (a "Mazahua Day") – all to promote and celebrate the Mazahuan culture and language
- there is a huge need to create jobs and to try to help stem the migration of young men to leave the area and find jobs in the US and Canada
- there is a need to protect the local traditions around endemic plants and medicines – the center will feature a botanical and medicinal herb garden to teach locals and visitors alike
- a community center would be the perfect place to showcase the culture and arts and crafts to visitors – as noted above, there is currently no tourism to the area other than to visit the UNESCO Monarch reserve, and
- it will bring much needed revenue opportunities.

# LA CASA DE CULTURA

The community has agreed to donate to the project a former convent building and its attached walled garden. The building is unused and run down and needs a lot of work but its bones are good and we are thrilled that the community wishes to contribute it in perpetuity to the project.

We have agreed and executed a formal Memorandum of Understanding to enshrine the donation and, in it, have agreed a vision of the new Casa de Cultura as follows:

## Purpose

- as a well-used and popular community and cultural center for use by the community of CM and the nearby towns
- as a gathering place for the community and a venue for community and assembly meetings
- as a focal point for promotion, teaching and celebration of Mazahua culture and language
- primarily for the community but also to attract tourists to CM to learn about and experience Mazahua culture and to buy local arts and crafts

## Design and building

- the community center will be attractive, exciting, vibrant and colourful
- it will be designed and decorated as much as possible in local Michoacan/Mazahua style, colours and textures
- all building/renovation work will be done by local Crescencio Morales builders if possible
- all building materials will be sourced locally if possible
- the center will be as environmentally

friendly and sustainable as possible

- the space will be designed to be as flexible as possible – so that a dancing area can double as a meeting area or a classroom area etc.

## Use/Activities

- community gatherings and meetings
- Mazahua language classes (adults and kids)
- Mazahua dance classes
- dance and music performances
- cooking classes (including using a ECOLIFE Patsari stove)
- weaving and textiles – including a loom
- a “museum” – the center will be decorated with local Mazahua basketware and textiles
- a “shop” – tourists will be able to buy the local basketware, textiles, honey etc...
- a botanic garden/medicinal and herb garden, teaching about the plants and perhaps guided forest walks for visitors
- a place for storytelling
- a photographic exhibition with photographs of local elders and others on the walls of the center
- a technology hub with photography and audio/visual equipment and workshops
- information about the local environment, the pine and oyamel fir forest and the Monarch butterfly migration and colonies





United States



Crescencio Morales

Michoacán

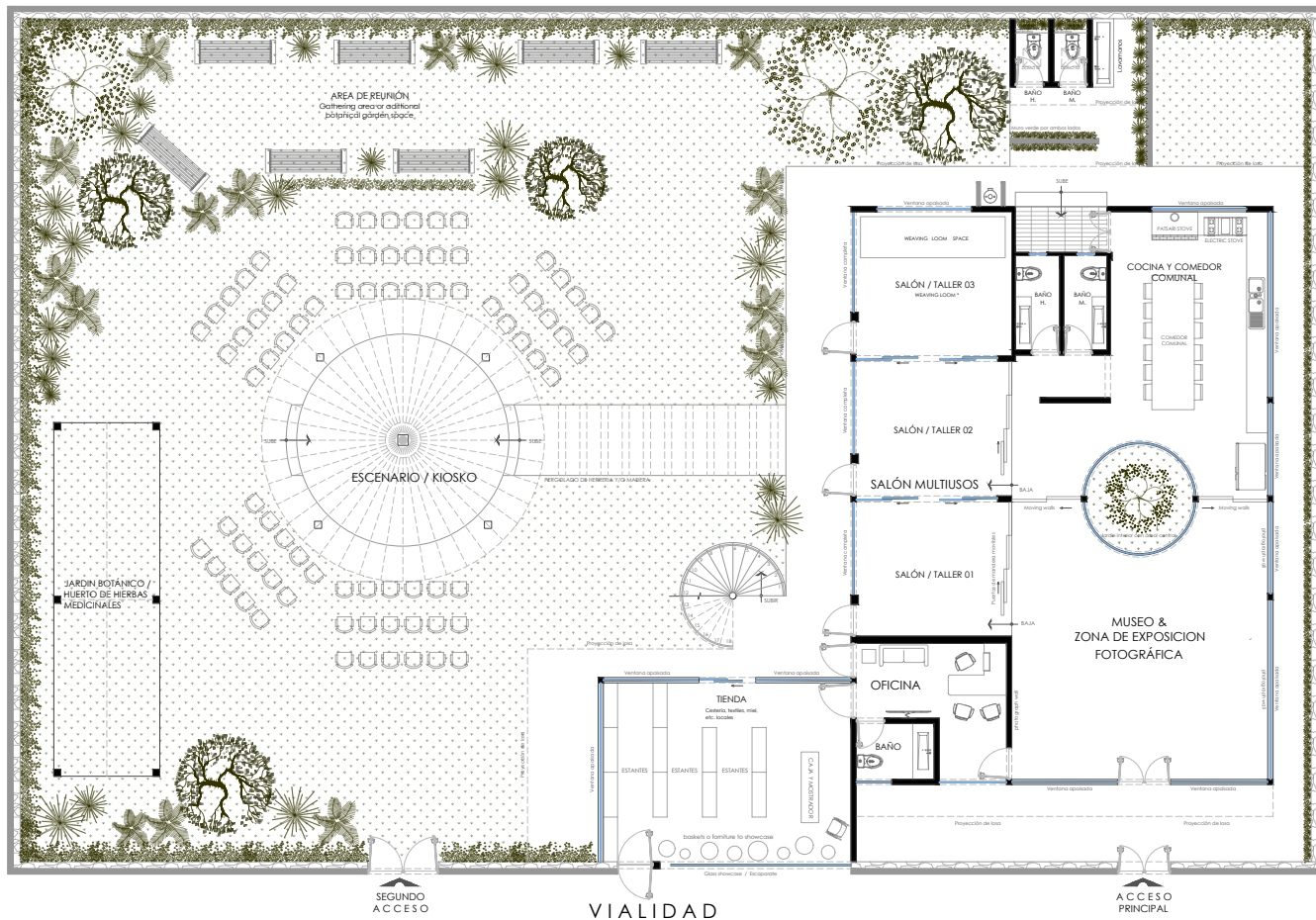
Gulf of Mexico

Pacific Ocean

Central America

# PROPOSED RENOVATION DESIGN

We have enlisted the help of Teresa Castillo as our local architect and designer for the Casa de Cultura project. We are very grateful that she is donating her time and experience pro bono. Her proposed design is as shown here:

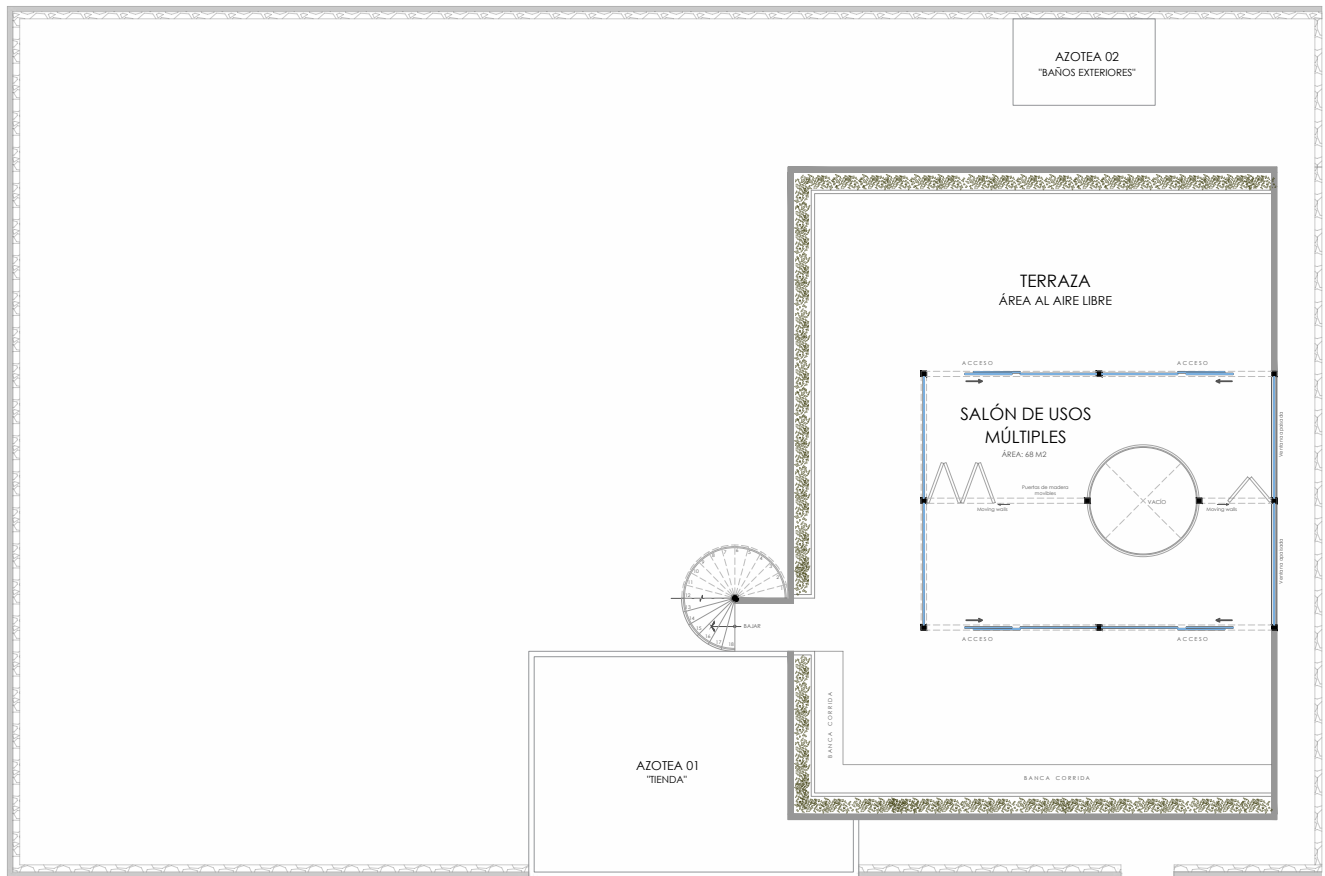


Ground floor





Currently, the building is run down and looks rather different but its bones are good.



New upper floor

## PROJECT TIMETABLE

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We have selected two potential local engineering and building teams from whom we have requested estimates for the cost of the renovation of the Casa de Cultura. We would ideally like the renovation work to be completed and the center to be operational by the end of 2023.

## ECOLIFE CONSERVATION

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Started by Bill Toone in 2003, ECOLIFE passionately believes, as we do, that humans and nature prosper together and works to protect wildlife, natural resources and the people who depend on them. In Michoacan, ECOLIFE builds and distributes culturally appropriate stoves which protect community health and which reduce deforestation to protect the Monarch butterfly. So far, they have installed almost 11,000 stoves and saved more than 795,000 trees in the Monarch butterfly habitat, helping

more than 50,000 local people and reducing 150,000 tons of CO2.

It was Bill and his wife Sunni and the ECOLIFE team that introduced us to the Mazahua community and we are delighted that some of the local young leaders who work for ECOLIFE and who live in Crescencio have agreed to project manage and run the proposed Mazahua Casa de Cultura.

We are proud to partner with them.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND TEAM

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### **Crescencio Morales community members involved in our discussions**

**include:** Cristian Amador Medina Guzman, Mario Alberto Esquivel Gonzalez, Paola Yedani Vasquez, Savino Segundo Nava, Victor Carrillo Posada, Jose Isabel Guzman Garcia, Jose Marcial, Padre Joel Garcia, Padre Omar Castro, Erasmo Alvarez Castillo, Eleazar Benitez, Silvestre Balcazar, Benita Benitez Sanchez, Hilda Catarino Benitas, Lucrecia Velasquez, Gregorio Mondragon Flores, Silvestre Chavez Sanchez, Gilberto Claudio Contreras,

Juan Pablo Jordan and Octavia Vasquez – plus many more...

### **Proposed community project leads:**

Cristian Amador Medina Guzman, Mario Alberto Esquivel Gonzalez and Paola Yedani Vasquez

**Architect:** Teresa Castillo

**ECOLIFE team:** Bill Toone, Sunni Black, Maria Castanada, Cristian Amador Medina Guzman, Mario Alberto Esquivel Gonzalez, Adrian

## OUR FIRST VISIT TO CRESCENCIO MORALES

“We joined them as they walked. Hundreds of men, women and children, all on pilgrimage, headed towards the small town. The local dogs trotted alongside, cautiously joining in. The line of people sang and chanted as they went, accompanied by the thunderous clap of celebratory fireworks. They carried flowers, candles, offerings and statues of the Virgin Mary.

All around were beautiful mountains of pine and oyamel fir trees. Butterflies fluttered by – thousands of them. The people snaked forwards, all smiles and anticipation. Off to the left across the valley as we turned a corner, now about a kilometer from the church, we saw another line of people snaking down from another mountain road towards the village. We could hear their distant song.

Another two groups of pilgrims walked towards us in the distance and we soon realized that four towns were converging. The people were all coming to the heart of the local Mazahua community, the town of Crescencio Morales.



They met at the church gates, their arrival chiming with the tower’s bells. A band started to play, loudly and enthusiastically. The children raced forward. The adults bowed their heads towards the church altar. The party began: an ancient tradition deep in the mountains of the Monarch butterfly.”



Protecting the Protectors

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