Under brilliant sky, 1,000 marchers affirm commitment to Mother Earth

By L.E. SCOTT
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A 21-foot-long red and yellow caterpillar undulated under a sunny, blue sky in Fairmount Park. Made of acrylic fabric with a hula-hoop skeleton and propelled by 10 adult legs beneath, the caterpillar was among the most striking features of an All-Species Parade on Earth Day.

The critter was the brainstorm of David Schiff, a member of Shomrei Admah (Guardians of the Earth), the organization that sponsored Sunday's parade and led 1,000 marchers on a 1-1/2-mile walk from the Philadelphia Zoo to Memorial Hall in the park.

Shomrei Admah is a nationwide network dedicated to revitalize the Jewish environmental ethic and spirit many believe to be integral to the Jewish heritage.

At one point in the parade, about 20 playful children got under the caterpillar and then burst out, flapping their wings, which were made of coat hangers and brightly decorated paper and pinned to their backs.

The butterfly theme was adopted by Shomrei Admah because Earth Day and Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, both took place on Sunday. The butterflies were a symbol of the book "Never Snow Another Butterfly," a collection of poetry written by children in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

Schiff, the creator of the caterpillar, said he was participating "to celebrate the earth, to show we care about what's happening and maybe to inspire each other, to know we can do something to make the world a little bit better."

He and his wife, Deborah, were part of a three-generation family at the Earth Day and Earth Week festivities. They had with them their 2-year-old son, Sammy, who had on butterfly wings that he had colored himself, and Deborah's father, Bob Siegel, a schoolteacher from Elizabeth, N.J., also sporting butterfly wings.

Shomrei Admah member Susan Marcus was an Indian bead bracelet and a Grateful Dead T-shirt featuring a black panther and the phrase, "Save the Rain Forest.""We're interested as Jews in saving the earth because that's where we all live," she said. Her 10-year-old daughter, Rachel, held up one side of a huge banner on which animals were painted, one of the banners that led the parade.

Others in the parade included a contingent of about 130 children, parents and teachers from Oak Lane Day School in Blue Bell. The second-graders, dressed as endangered species, wore costumes depicting such animals as a dolphin, bobcat, penguin, bear and bat.

Others in the parade waved posters that said "Stop Killing Tasmanian Devils From Australia," "Stop Killing Fox Bats From Africa," and "Equi the Tree Frog of Puerto Rico."

In a ceremony before the parade began, Rabbi Marcia Prager, a marriage counselor and adjunct professor who teaches Hebrew at Temple University, greeted the crowd. To the sounds of harp music provided by Julia Haines, Prager said she was disheartened at the thought of polluted rivers, destroyed forests and safe technologies that lie fallow because they are less profitable than their more dangerous counterparts.

"Yet," Prager said. "I feel so much better when I look at the world and feel so here today that we are going to turn things around, that perhaps we can be the generation when it's the majority, not the minority, who can be in tune with nature."

After the parade arrived at Memorial Hall, participants dispersed into the crowd to enjoy the rest of the Earth Day celebration in the park that featured folk music, rock and roll, an outdoor courtroom with speeches, performances by children and a coffeehouse featuring poetry readings.

Among the speakers was Ellen Bernstein, founder of Shomrei Admah, who made it a point to take to a stage at 2 p.m., the same time the annual Yom Hashoah memorial ceremony was taking place in Center City.

The ceremony is sponsored by the Memorial Committee for the Six Million Jewish Martyrs of the Jewish Community Relations Council. The event is tied together Earth Day and Yom Hashoah. She mentioned a 1944 trip by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross to the Maidanek concentration camp in Poland. Now a psychiatrist, Kubler-Ross did relief work in post-war Europe. "Her first and most lasting impression of the camp," said Bernstein, "was of the butterflies she saw caged on the stark walls of the prison barracks. Within days, perhaps within hours of their passing, those doomed to death left their final messages in these butterflies - messages not of despair but of hope, not of grief but of conviction of freedom, not of anger but of love."

"It is this message of hope and empowerment and love that the All-Species Parade and the butterflies bring to all of you and to Earth Day today," said Bernstein, who, dressed in yellow blouse and purple jacket, symbolized a colorful butterfly.

Another Jewish participant in Earth Day was Lori Jarmen, a physical therapist at Moss Rehabilitation Hospital, who said she is urging the hospital to adopt a recycling project.

"I'm trying to make my contribution where I work," she said.

Shefa Pelicrow, another participant, is completing her second year at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote. "A lot of my inspiration comes from being on the earth and knowing God through the wonders of creation," she said. "That really fuels my prayer and inspires me to praise God."

Pelicrow, who in July will lead a four-day class on nature and Judaism in New Mexico, said, "Judaism has become such an urban, indoor kind of religion. What inspired our ancestors was the scope of creation. The prophets and the psalmists saw God through nature, through the sea and through the mountains and hills."

Also in the crowd was New York film producer Rebecca Michelman, who was collecting footage for a film she is making for public television. Her goal, said, is to "illustrate to our kids the rich Jewish tradition of living in harmony with the environment. For a thousand years, the Jews were totally disenfranchised from the land, wandering in the Diaspora, often denied ownership of land and unable to fulfill the biblical and rabbinic mandates to be guardians of the earth."

"I think the reclamation of the land of Israel in this century has re-engaged our spiritual connection to the earth," Michelman said. "Since the establishment of the Jewish state, Israel has been an example to the world of a society that used technology to preserve the earth, not to destroy it."

"We are hearing the warning bells now," she said. "And if we don't wake up and alert ourselves to the dangerous situation we're facing, we will experience an environmental holocaust."

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Michelman said the earth is experiencing an ecological Kristallnacht, the night of rampage that launched the Nazi era in Europe.

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