

Saving the Bees

by Phil Chandler

The big lesson of the 20th century was this: the way we treat the natural world has repercussions way beyond the immediately obvious. Our destruction of rainforests and other habitats in the name of 'progress' has triggered irrevocable, cumulative cycles of species loss, soil erosion and climate change that we are only beginning to understand and that will haunt us for generations.

From here, we can look back over the last 150 years and see how commercial beekeeping developed from the Victorian desire to dominate the natural world and subjugate its inhabitants to the will of man. This was the dominant paradigm throughout the first two thirds of the twentieth century, until we began to wake up to what was happening to the planet as a result of our arrogant assumption that we could treat it as a bottomless waste pit.

Some of us looked out at decimated forests, depleted soil and polluted water and realised that we had collectively to change our ways.

The subsequent - and now rapid - growth of the organic food movement indicates the beginnings of a shift in human perception, while the global dominance of a handful of agri-chemical corporations, intent on covering the earth with their genetically mutated organisms and chemical-dependent crops, represents the old order, stubbornly clinging to outmoded, reductionist science as their gospel and taking their moral guidance and business model from drug pushers.

And so it is with the bees. Since L. L. Langstroth introduced us to the wonders of his movable-frame hive, we have assumed that we know better than they do what living conditions they require, what size cells they prefer to build, how many colonies can live in close proximity - and every other detail of their lives down to the mating of their queens, we have sought to bring under our control. And now we are reaping the rewards of our arrogance: bees that are dependant for their survival on chemical inputs and human interventions, and which abandon their hives in growing numbers.

Can this situation be reversed? Nobody can say for sure, but those of us who are experimenting with sustainable beekeeping systems believe that the answer lies in a low-tech, low-impact approach, that allows bees to build comb according to their own design, eliminating the artificial constraints imposed on them by the use of frames and foundation.

Foundation - thin sheets of wax impressed with the beginnings of hexagonal cells - was introduced towards the end of the 19th century as a way of 'helping' the bees; saving them some effort and therefore redirecting their energy towards doing more work for us, i.e. making more honey. Because it is milled to what has been decreed is the 'correct' cell size for worker bees, then that is what the bees are more-or-less forced to build. Because the generally-adopted cell size of worker foundation is 0.3-0.5mm larger than feral bees build un-aided, this is thought to have led to an overall increase in the size of the bees themselves, due to the fact that they grow to the capacity of the cells in which they pupate.

Larger bees were thought to be a good thing, as they would surely have longer probosces - enabling them to feed on formerly unreachable nectars - and a larger payload capacity for nectar and pollen. Unfortunately, enlargement appears also to have resulted in reduced flying efficiency, shorter lifespan and quite possibly an increased susceptibility to disease and parasites.

Proponents of 'small-cell' foundation claim that a significant decrease in the Varroa population results from its use, due - it is suggested - to there being less space in the cells for them to reproduce, combined with a roughly one-day reduction in the worker bee emergence date compared with 'large-cell' bees. But this is still a step short of full 'naturalization'.

The fact is that, given the choice, bees do not build uniform worker cells, but vary the size according to factors we can only guess at. Foundation or artificial comb - of whatever size - is part of the old control-freak, we-know-best paradigm that has caused their current problems. Having seen the beautifully formed, naturally constructed comb that bees build in skeps and in my top bar hives, I would not go back to frames and foundation if Thorne were giving them away.

Bees need to build comb. It is a part of their natural lifecycle and a part of their biochemical makeup to extrude wax and to work it, and they need the freedom to build it their way. If that means they raise 15% or 20% of their colony as drones, then so be it: that is what they need to do and we may never know the reason why, nor do we need to. Our pre-occupation with drone culling cannot but affect the quality of queens, as many of the most important traits are passed down the drone line, according to the late Brother Adam and others. It would not surprise me if the many stories of poor quality queens I have heard and read about recently were caused by a local shortage of good drones.

It seems to me that beekeeping - especially commercial beekeeping - is no longer sustainable in its present form. We need to re-think our management methods from top to bottom, or face an unprecedented decline in the health and strength of the bee population and the end of honey - at least in the public perception - as a pure, healthy food.

Intensive beekeeping - especially on a commercial scale - generates massive amounts of time- and energy-consuming work in return for a variable and unpredictable honey crop. Copious quantities of power and water are consumed in manufacturing, cleaning and sterilising equipment, rendering wax and cleaning up the inevitable, intractable, sticky mess. Transporting our kit around the countryside burns carbon fuels by the tankful. Substantial buildings are required for storing mountains of woodwork and housing decapping machines, extractors, boilers, tanks and all the myriad bits and pieces that inevitably accumulate around a beekeeping operation. Hives, frames, supers, feeders and covers are manufactured using power-hungry, saws and planes, while human time and energy is spent nailing together bits of wood, fitting foundation and repairing broken parts.

Meanwhile, 'scientific' chemical treatments have resulted in fitter parasites and tougher bacteria. We artificially maintain strains of bee that are ill-equipped to deal with infections or infestations, despite their ancestors having done so, unaided, for at least 100 million years. Some beekeepers routinely use potentially dangerous and illegal chemicals - including antibiotics and organophosphates - risking prosecution and loss of reputation, as well as their own and their customers' health, while making little or no long-term impact on the bees' problems. Many of these chemicals are lipophilic and persist in wax, which is recycled into foundation and imparts a low-level dose of a cocktail of who-knows-what to the next generation of bees.

All this might be understandable if the consistent outcome was bumper crops of honey and happy, healthy bees. However, honey crops will forever depend more on the weather than any other single factor and, as I write, our bees are suffering from unprecedented levels of infestation by the varroa mite and endemic infection by viruses for which mites are the most likely vector. Thanks to those who persist in shipping bees around the world instead of breeding from local stocks, the Small Hive Beetle and the Tropilaelaps mite will most probably arrive in Britain soon. So-called Africanised bees may not be far behind.

In our modern, western world, where relatively few people have a day-to-day, intimate relationship with nature, public appreciation and understanding of the pivotal importance of the honeybee in the greater scheme of things has been largely lost. Bees are regarded by many as a pest rather than a vital, natural resource. A surprising number of people cannot tell a honeybee from a wasp, as many swarm catchers will testify. Our government would rather cover the countryside with untested, genetically modified crops than invest in truly sustainable, organic farming or fund research into bee diseases. Even our (British) beekeeping association takes money from agricultural companies in return for their patronage of poisonous sprays and passive acceptance of GM crops.

In practical terms, sustainability may mean accepting lower honey production per colony in return for healthier bees. It may mean - at least in the short term - accepting heavier winter losses in return for improved vigour in surviving colonies. It almost certainly means increased vigilance in inspecting colonies and assessing desirable traits, which will mean that more beekeepers will need to educate themselves beyond a basic level in bee husbandry and breeding, and that can be no bad thing.

The remedy, as well as the blame, for the current parlous state of beekeeping lies with beekeepers themselves: nobody else knows enough or cares enough to take the necessary action. We need to share more information with each other and make more effort to educate the public, especially the next generation.

We may need to re-think much of what we now take for granted, even if it means discarding protocols we have regarded as holy writ for the last 150 years. We may have to think the unthinkable: that commercial-scale beekeeping is inherently unsustainable. After all, keeping 50 or 100 or more beehives in an area that nature might furnish with only one or two colonies is very like cramming 10,000 chickens into a battery farm and has similar implications for aberrant behaviour and spread of diseases.

I am now looking at beekeeping as more of a conservation and restoration project than a sideline business. Much as I love honey, I am more interested in breeding bees that can look after themselves. I don't know to what extent I will succeed, but in only 18 months, over 750 people have joined our online forum and by freely sharing information, we are developing a balanced system of beekeeping that is becoming genuinely sustainable.

A key test of intelligence is the ability to adapt one's behaviour according to feedback from the environment. The feedback from the bees right now is surely telling us to change our ways or lose them forever, and thereby risk sealing our own fate. We must look more closely at our complicity in the over-use of agricultural chemicals and find better ways to achieve our goal of a fair honey crop than the propagation of poisons. We must accept that synthesized treatments for mites and brood diseases are ultimately doomed to failure, as they inevitably create dependency.

The real answer lies with the bees themselves. Our job is to provide them with the best possible conditions in which they can solve their own problems, as they have always done.

About the Author

Philip Chandler is author of 'The Barefoot Beekeeper' and hosts a 'sustainable beekeeping' site at www.biobees.com