

Who Killed the Honey Bee?

Beekeeping, looking after pets, and farming: it is natural that we seek husbandry procedures that are suitable and best practice for the animals in our care.

For example, since the turn of the 20th century better dietary pet food is available for our dogs and cats; farmers no longer tether cattle; modern pig pens prevent piglets from being crushed...

However, commerce does influence animal husbandry procedures and regulations, leading to compromises, even denials, which have resulted in disasters such as BSE, foot & mouth, bird flu...

Now we also have CCD (Colony Collapse Disorder) and Varroa Mite infestation within our honey bee population... the reasons unknown!

Whilst it's almost certain there is no one individual reason for the dramatic bee colony losses, it is certain that agrochemicals, Varroa and bee husbandry combined are the cause, in other words us the human race.

Well we won't change the agrochemical industry overnight, but we can choose best beekeeping practices. What are these best practices, opinions do vary!

As a natural beekeeper I would like to highlight the following scenario for your consideration-

In the UK, bee husbandry practices are largely centred on the National beehive. This beehive, developed by the Victorians, was seen as a vast improvement over the Skep straw hive. Now a colony's honey could be harvested without destroying the brood nest and the hive could be easily manipulated and viewed by the beekeeper at, and for, his or her convenience.

The design of the National and similar framed bee hives has not changed in principal since their Victorian debut: I suppose chiefly because, at best, beekeeping has been a cottage industry in this country, the framed beehive serving the needs of the general beekeeper very well and the goal of high honey yields at harvest time being achieved.

The British Beekeeping Association therefore promotes framed beehives, usually the National hive, as the standard hive for beekeepers, experienced and new. In fact, their comprehensive beekeeping training syllabus is based on this system and those procedures associated with it.

We also see organisations like the Co-op promoting similar beehive designs, utilising easily removable frames with preformed comb, to potential new beekeepers as a solution to solving the current population decline of the honey bee.

Now, questions are being asked about established best beekeeping practices. After all, the honey bee population is in decline and high winter colony mortality rates persist. Something is wrong!

Such questioning of the previously unquestioned is creating intense debate and we now see two groups, or types, of beekeepers emerging. The traditionalist whose bee husbandry practices are based on the operation of the framed bee hive and the natural beekeeper who is adopting top bar hives.

Easy to say now, but the views and warnings of academics like Rudolf Steiner, and deeply thoughtful beekeepers like Abbe Warre, in the first quarter of the 20th Century, are being confirmed as the then-modern, and now-current, beekeeping practices are coming to be re-evaluated in terms of bee health and well-being.

These views have been dismissed by some beekeepers and possibly even by the BBKA; blame being pointed at agrochemical companies such as Bayer. It might come as a surprise then, that only recently has the BBKA, dropped endorsement of chemical products with Bayer. **Not all is as it seems or should be!**

I believe we really do have a situation where the beekeeper is inadvertently now part of the bee health problem. Not a guardian but a manipulator, forcing the bee to adopt “best” comb sizes on removable frames, their nest being disturbed weekly, Drones being deliberately culled, swarming instincts being held back, weak queen breeding...

Are we beekeepers the equivalent of battery chicken farmers, are the results going to be a bee epidemic, do we have that now!

This is obviously controversial, however, is this why in particular more and more new beekeepers are adopting a natural beekeeping methodology, letting the bees build their own comb, not disturbing the colony, allowing them to remain warm...

What is right or wrong is important to know. Current bee research is focusing on cures such as chemicals, fungicides, virus and super bee breeding. **Were missing the point!**

We need a truly independent and respected scientific body to look at prevention rather than a cure.

Question- Is the methodology of natural beekeeping, allowing the bees to behave as their instinct directs them and the survival of the fittest going to allow our bee population to become stronger.

It could be back to basics for the bee, natural beekeeping for you and I. Overtime as they have proved for 30 million years they will do better with minimum interference from man. Commercialisation of the bee for honey and factory pollination needs to stop. Respect for the bee's requirements not manipulation will solve bee health, this is what our scientific institutions should be researching!

Oh by the way this is urgent, so called third world counties are adopting framed beehives to increase honey production as a valuable source of income. **Time is running out.**

David Johnson

Natural-Beekeeping. www.natural-beekeeping.co.uk