

## PLIGHT OF POLLEN-CARRYING PILGRIMS

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The domesticated honeybee (*Apis mellifera*) and wild pollinators in this and other countries are in trouble. An estimated 23 percent of all beekeeping operations in the U.S. suffered devastating losses to their bee colonies during the winter of 2006-2007 and losses have also been reported in Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece<sup>1</sup>. The phenomenon called Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) has sparked a buzz (pun intended) that's extended beyond professional beekeepers and commercial growers. Why should the rest of us care? Because all of us eat, and as we've been reminded lately, our food supply depends on the unpaid labor of pollinators like the honeybee.

### **A Misapplied Industrial Model**

There's been a lot of speculation about what might be causing these devastating losses in commercial colonies. Recent research suggests the cause of CCD may be a virus, Israeli Acute Paralysis Virus (IAPV). This and other research suggests that other stressors, including pesticides and herbicides, the use of antibiotics, genetically modified (GM) crops, lack of diversity from mono-crop farming, and habitat loss, may contribute. The practice of trucking bee colonies around the country as part of pollination services may be causing additional stress. The practice of extracting all the honey from the hive and feeding back high fructose corn syrup (from GMO corn) may also contribute to the problem. "It is likely," says Sharon Labchuk, a part-time beekeeper on Prince Edward Island, "that some biological limit in the bees has been crossed."<sup>2</sup>

There's something profoundly wrong with the way humans have applied the industrial model to farm animals and plant crops. This "mechanistic mindset," writes Craig MacKintosh, "reduce[s] an infinitely complicated world of interactions to an overly simplistic viewpoint." Biological forms can't be "engineered" to serve the industrial model and "Bio-engineering, in the worse case scenario, [is] an ecological catastrophe with no chance for a product recall."<sup>3</sup>

### **Wild Pollinators in Trouble Too**

Wild pollinators that pollinate an estimated 15% of crops grown in the U.S. appear to be in trouble too.<sup>4</sup> Gary Nabhan sounds this warning: "Should these pollen-carrying pilgrims continue to decline, the colors, fragrances, and productivity of American wildlands may be diminished as well. Pollination, one of nature's services that we've always assumed to be free and therefore unworthy of our investment and care, may soon cost American consumers several billion dollars a year in increased food prices."<sup>5</sup> Nabhan says that there are now fewer domesticated honeybees left in North America than at any other moment during our lifetimes, and they are not, he says, likely to recover in numbers before we die.

### **An Holistic Alternative**

An alternative approach to the mechanistic husbanding of the honeybee is a holistic approach embodied in biodynamics. After attending a biodynamic beekeeping workshop at The Hatch in Thornbury, England, Philip Chandler, a British beekeeper, concluded that "A mutually successful and sustainable relationship with our bees must be based on a truly holistic approach: we need to learn more about how the colony works as a complete, living entity and the manifold ways in which it interacts with its environment and with other living things. For too long we have been locked in an old-fashioned, reductionist approach, dealing with bees as if they were mere machines created solely for our benefit, instead of highly-evolved, wild creatures, with which we are privileged to work."<sup>6</sup>

Biodynamic beekeeping practices recognize and honor the bees' natural processes and causes them the minimum amount of stress. In the biodynamic system, bees are allowed to build their own comb according to their needs, acknowledging that the bees know better than we do what is best for them. Biodynamic beekeepers raise queens exclusively from those generated by the swarming impulse and do their best to leave ample supplies of honey for the bees' winter stores. They only feed sugar syrup—with a little chamomile tea added—when absolutely necessary when a period of bad weather in the spring causes a shortage of nectar and the bees are in danger of starvation.<sup>7</sup>

### **You Can Heal the Honeybee Too**

Anyone can contribute to the healing of the honeybee and other wild pollinators. Consider adding a hive or two at home for your own honey harvest and to improve pollination in your garden. Or bring in blue mason bees to help pollinate your fruit trees. If you garden or are landscaping your home, plant “bee patches” of flowers that bloom from early spring through fall and that can provide food for native wild bees. Instead of trying to achieve an over-neat landscape, try leaving some untidy corners to provide nesting sites for bees. And limit your use of chemicals in the garden and in your yard—bees pack the “pockets” on the back of their legs with pollen and return this pollen to the hive. Pollen carrying chemical toxins is returned to the hive and fed to young bees.

The industrial model clearly isn't working, not for the honeybee, not for all the other creatures we share the planet with, and not for ourselves. We may have pushed the envelope as far as we can and now it's time to relearn the older lessons of careful stewardship and experienced partnership with all the parts of our neighborhood, from the soil micro-organisms at our feet to the planetary influences in the heavens. Somewhere between is the bee, desperately telling us that our system is dangerously out of whack.

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<sup>1</sup> “Bee researchers close in on Colony Collapse Disorder,” *Bee Culture Magazine*.

<sup>2</sup> Craig MacKintosh, “Organic Bees Surviving Colony Collapse Disorder,” *celsias.com*

<sup>3</sup> --Craig MacKintosh.

<sup>4</sup> “Bumblebees Missing in Action,” *news.yahoo.com*

<sup>5</sup> Gary Nabhan, “The Other Migrant Workers: Pollinators Making a Run for the Border,” *grist.com*

<sup>6</sup> Philip Chandler, review of *Biodynamic Beekeeping: A Weekend with Michael Weiler*, “The Nature of Bees and Biodynamic Beekeeping at The Hatch in Thornbury, England” (August 26-28, 2005), <http://biobees.blogspot.com/2006/03/biodynamic-beekeeping-weekend-with.html>

<sup>7</sup> --Philip Chandler.