

Beekeeping in the world

*Press release from press conferences on 24 April 2009 in Paris and on 27 April 2009 in Brussels
Promotion of the 2009 Apimondia Congress, Montpellier, France 15 to 20 September 2009*

Several releases were given during the press conferences in Paris and Brussels. The following was given by Gilles Ratia, president of the 2009 Apimondia Congress.

Beekeeping in the world and... us!

Is a drop of honey the same in Greece, Guatemala or in Papua New Guinea?
Yes and no!

Despite an ancestral knowledge of the secrets of life of bees, despite the recent globalisation of ideas, practices and tastes, it comes as a surprise to realise that the art of beekeeping still holds some wonderfully diverse hidden treasures. The approaches and solutions vary depending on cultural, botanic, climatic, economic, technical, commercial conditions and alas, even sadder in this third millennium, they are also subject to other risks due to the various forms of pollution and the drastic changes nature is being subjected to.

Exciting honey, passionate beekeepers

Our fabulous drop of honey could be as clear as water in the heart of Hungary, black as ebony in the Kurdish scrub, wonderfully golden in the Argentine pampas or even as white as snow in the mountainous foothills of Vietnam. Indeed, the nectars from acacias, mixed flowers, clovers, litchis offer a variety of honeys which are not only rich in colour, but also in flavour, types of crystallisation and therapeutic virtues. In fact, under all latitudes, from Northern Scandinavia to Tierra del Fuego, through the oases of the Sahara, there are no less than four hundred different monofloral honeys, a fantastic source awaiting discovery by anyone with a passion for bees, and fearless of stings.

Whether they are honey hunters in the forests of the Congo, mountaineering beekeepers on the cliffs in Bhutan, or honey gatherers in what remains of the jungles of Borneo, enlightened honey lovers in the Austrian Alps or even businessmen migrating their hives across the length and breadth of the USA, everyone is completely at the mercy of the extraordinary activity and complexity within their bee colonies. Without passion, no practician... From whatever continent, the king of the smoker has a fairly similar profile: close to Nature, individualist, often ecologist and to finish the portrait, he is amazingly inventive. The whole of the Louvre Museum would scarcely suffice to display all the systems, DIY or beautifully finished, created either to make the job easier in the apiary, or to look after hive produce in the honey house. From bamboo cages for

transporting the celebrated queen bees to electronic systems able to inform the professional at distance via GSM about the state of the honey flow, through stainless steel extraction plants made to meet ISO norms, the range of all this equipment gives a clue to the sophistication of one of the last branches of farming which is still very, very close to Nature. The products from the hive, honey, pollen, royal jelly and propolis, are incredibly rich and can truly be labelled as "alicaments" due to their well-known therapeutic virtues. Did you know that more and more health professionals are showing an interest in apitherapy?

On an international scale, market fluctuations and mortality rates

Our drop of honey travels all over the place due to the international market. Over a quarter of hive products cross over borders for the pleasure and curiosity of our taste buds! Production and exports fluctuate due to a number of factors: government support, action taken by development NGOs, consumer protection laws and, especially, increasingly erratic climatic conditions. Many beekeepers suffer from the tough rules of international commerce. This last point, plus the aging of those engaged in beekeeping, is putting the business in danger, as the industry has already suffered over the last few years from abnormally high mortality rates among bee colonies.

If for the last five centuries, 5% losses in colonies were the biological norm, the present 40% mortality rate overtakes all expectations and one has to recognise that the bee, in its role as a bio-indicator, has "given the alert", it is absolutely imperative that we hear and understand the message to avoid a future major crisis for mankind. It is as important as that! Don't forget that when a bee produces one Euro for the beekeeper, it also gives an average of 15 Euros to the farmers, orchardists, market gardeners and horticulturalists within a three kilometre radius around the apiary. In fact, as a pollinator, the bees of the world count for 80% of the sex life of plants, which represents 15% of our food. And do not let us forget the colossal and intimate work done for the wild plants: billions and billions of tireless bees generously maintain the world's biodiversity, day after day, in silence without asking for anything. Without them...

But take heed, the bees are dying. Known here as a weakening of beekeeping stock, and elsewhere as the symptom of the disappearing bees or on the other side of the Atlantic, Colony Collapse disorder, worldwide colony losses have become unbearable for many professionals and farmers fear their yields will suffer. Huge question: what is the cause of it? For a start and out of intellectual honesty, let us say that we are all in some way responsible! By inventing arms of massive destruction, such as the new generation of neocotinoid pesticides with high remanence in the soil, by neglecting to consider the accumulative effects of anti-varroa treatment in the beeswax foundation used in hives, by behaving like the proverbial ostrich over the risks of the Hertzian pollution, caused by new communication technology (for example, just as we did for so long over the health dangers of asbestos), by under-estimating the incredible changes in the bees' diet due to the degradation of the biodiversity in our countryside (ever increasing "green deserts" overtaking the land), by turning a blind eye to the problems caused by over feeding artificial food to bees or repeatedly migrating hives, by refusing to admit that the water (mostly from runoff) collected by our beloved bees is becoming more and more polluted, by simply complaining about

the growing invasion of our fields by OGM crops (self-producing insecticides + insufficient studies of the effects of modified pollen on bee metabolism), by our lack of knowledge of the possible interaction between all the problems listed above, it is inevitable that the phenomenon of abnormal mortality rates in our colonies will continue or even increase. May we never forget that without them...!

Most financially independent scientists with an open mind agree that the disappearance of bee colonies can be attributed to numerous factors. There are no less than fifteen possible reasons, all resulting from the "progress" being made by our advanced civilizations. An easy explanation just does not exist. We are confronted by a complex mix of factors and synergisms of which the hierarchy varies from biotope to biotope and region to region. In one place pesticides could play a major role due to economic interests (in Western Europe for example), elsewhere a lack of knowledge about treatments for new bee diseases and parasites (Africa and the Himalayan Mountains), closer to home, in North Africa, our demand for essential oil of thyme and oregano is drying up these age-old sources of nectar. And what can be said about the American "production-line" approach to bees, which are kept working by feeding isoglucose and antibiotics?

Solutions are needed urgently, right now!

Confronted by this crisis, beekeepers are doing everything to get rid of the causes that are due to their own practices. But this still leaves the factors outside their control, such as the massive use of pesticides, the marketing of new highly toxic molecules (less than 50 g per hectare is enough to "clean up" the fields) and the use of new techniques for spreading (coated seeds). Insecticides are made to kill. Sadly, our bees cannot escape them.

There is an urgent need for governments, NGOs, federating organisms like Apimondia, but especially YOU, the media, to get into the collective unconscious the importance of the role of this fragile insect, our honeybee, usually crazy about the quintessence offered by flowers but certainly not in love with the poison being regularly thrown on them. Our future resides in sustainable agriculture but even more importantly, in the development of methods in tune with organic standards.

The congress in Montpellier, on the theme of "The Bee, Sentinel of the Environment" will bring its contribution towards creating a new awareness of these problems, so that at every table from hilly Ethiopia to emerging Uruguay, through powerful China or even calm Finland, people can continue to savour that celebrated drop of honey...

Gilles RATIA

President of the Apimondia 2009 Congress and International Beekeeping Consultant.

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