Colony Collapse Disorder

Do We Harvest What We Sow?

by Gunther Hauk

The crisis that we now face with the honeybee is, in this writer's opinion, of no less significance than global warming. Much more than we can imagine depends on the presence and vitality of the honeybee population.

Once this insect was revered as a sacred animal, along with the cow and the scarab beetle, all of which were known to create fertility, a thriving flora and fauna, throughout the land. Not only agriculture, but our very lives depend on these animals. Today, reverence has given way to a single-minded emphasis on the economic returns they can provide: how much milk, how much honey, how much pollination service can I get out of the cow and the honeybee?

Along with this change of attitude, several crises in beekeeping have arisen. In the 1960s there were inexplicable great losses of colonies in Europe. With the advent of the varroa and tracheal mites and with the spread of American foulbrood, great losses had to be endured. By the mid-1990s one could read estimates that here in the United States the number of colonies had dwindled from 7.5 million down to 2.5 million. In 1996 the *New York Times* published an article titled "The Hush of the Hives."

The way these crises were handled was no different from how we tend to take care of human illnesses today: we always look for the silver bullet, the imaginary salvation fabricated by Hollywood. The chemical industry offers one chemical to combat mites, and another against foulbrood. By now we should know that solutions such as these are not only short-lived and bring with them many unwanted side effects, but they also upset the delicate balance of interdependence in the household of nature.

For some years now our efforts have been intensified to breed *the* bee: one that can let us do with her whatever we desire. Thus an ad in beekeeping journals a few years ago stated: "We asked the bees what would make them more profitable" . . . ! This "superbee" would be able to cope with mites, hive beetles, viruses and bacteria, and would stand up to all the environmental poisons: insecticides, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides.

We have become accustomed to focus on these attackers of the honeybee as the enemies that have to be conquered. We do the same when we blame other individuals or other nations for our problems, without first questioning our own attitudes, beliefs and practices. In the case of the honeybee, it is our farming practices and our beekeeping methods that must be scrutinized if we are to reverse the calamity that is threatening.

In the last 150 years many critical inventions have permitted beekeeping to become commercialized, so that apiaries can be run like factories. Colonies are trucked by the thousands from one monoculture to the next. Queens are bred artificially and exchanged like the batteries in a cell phone, with one difference: the rate of exchange is much faster. In our efforts to create the superbee we don't shrink from artificially inseminating queens — an impressive technical feat, but one that is completely against the bee's nature. We raise millions of queens merely to kill them on their eighth day of embryonic development so that we can harvest royal jelly. Why? To save a wrinkle or two, at best.

Thousands of tons of corn syrup or sugar syrup are fed to our U.S. colonies so that we can harvest practically all of the honey instead of the surplus. No one asks what this does to the honeybee's metabolism, the delicate balance between the acidity of its digestive tract and the alkalinity of its blood. For simplicity's sake we also give the bees plastic foundations upon which to build their honeycomb: not only as a place where honey is stored, but also where the brood is raised. Perhaps we humans will also have wombs with plastic inserts in the future and call it progress.

Our beekeeping has turned thoughtless, careless, ruthless. Oh yes, we do love our bees — as long as we can get a lot out of them. We treat the honeybee like all other animals in the factory farming model, all of which have experienced disastrous declines in their vitality as a result. The Holstein cow, for example, pumped full of high-protein feed, hormones and antibiotics, will give almost twice as much milk as she normally would, but instead of living 20 years and having 15 calves, she now has a life expectancy of 3-4 years and an average of 0.9 calves in our dairy factories.

Beekeepers have been sucked into a conventional agricultural paradigm: produce as much as possible as cheaply as possible, regardless of quality or the lack of life-sustaining practices. Consumers, too, are too often concerned only with getting food as cheaply as possible, without any thought for the farmer's or the beekeeper's ability to survive on his or her earnings. The current crisis, little as we wish to acknowledge it, is a direct result of this kind of thinking.

Are there any solutions to the honeybee crisis? There are, but none that are easy or quick. The attitude that readily sacrifices wholesomeness for a quick monetary return results from the fact that we actually know very little about life processes and the laws that govern them. A return to humility and reverence for the mystery of life, an admission that, clever as we are, we still have much to learn if we are not to destroy ourselves, is the first step in a truly effective response.

After 33 years of beekeeping, it is my firm conviction that we must take a hard look at what *we ourselves are doing,* not simply try to wipe out one or the other "enemy." The mites, bacteria and viruses that plague our colonies all have a purpose: to get rid of what is weak and sick. What is making the honeybee weak and sick, if not our own treatment of her?

Our first questions, then, should be: What practices only serve my comfort and economic return but thwart the honeybee's life instincts? What do I do that weakens and stresses the colony and thereby adds to a lowering of the immune system, leaving the animal susceptible to any of the above-mentioned attacks? (See this author's book *Toward Saving the Honeybee* for a more detailed analysis and positive suggestions.)

The second question is a broader one and has to do with the sterile monocultures we are producing as well as all the poisons we put into the landscape, into our agriculture, our lawns, and use in our households. Environmentally benign and sustainable practices are a must if we are to protect all of our animals and our fellow human beings from the rise of illness and weakened life forces.

We ourselves can experience how stress, poison, food without nutritive quality, and/or lack of appreciation for our essential being all work together to bring about a weakening of our immune system. We are then open to all kinds of viruses, bacteria and fungi.

This has happened to the honeybee. Although some scientists have recently theorized that mites, viruses and bacteria have compromised the honeybee's immune system, the exact opposite is true: *We* have undermined her immune system with stress, poisons, GMOs and ever-more-industrialized beekeeping methods. In turn, external "enemies" whose task in nature is to get rid of what is sick have been given new opportunities to do their work. This is a thought that will not be accepted readily by professional or even hobby beekeepers since it demands radical rethinking and re-evaluation of what we have accomplished in the last century.

Regarding the strange phenomenon of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), in which honeybee colonies leave their homes and do not return, I would suggest the following train of thought. When stress, poisoning, unhealthy food, and exploitative practices, coupled with lack of respect and esteem, all reach a certain level, the spiritual core, that part of a being that keeps the organism healthy, is compromised. When we look at an animal, we perceive its material body. Historical Native Americans, still clairvoyant, "saw" that spiritual entity that governs the animal's life instincts with complete wisdom. They called this spiritual being the "Great Bear" or "Great Buffalo." We would suggest that when the "Great Bee" experiences all these destructive forces, she withdraws from the physical entity.

When the spiritual center of the colony is thus weakened, the individual bee flies out and does not come back. There is really nothing to come back to. The Great Bee, which might also be called the group soul, cannot maintain the integrity of the colony.

Albert Einstein is reported to have said, "If honeybees become extinct, human society will follow in four years." And Rudolf Steiner, the great scientist and innovator of the 20th century, warned in 1923 that unless we change our mechanistic way of beekeeping, the honeybee might not survive the century. Seeing deeper into nature than most people, he stated that our very lives depend on beekeeping (refer to Steiner's book *Bees).*

Our own lives depend on whether we decide to take responsibility for our role in the decline of the honeybee. If we do, this crisis may become a true turning point in the creation of a life-sustaining agriculture.

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