

IBRA's Role in Educating People about Beekeeping

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For thousands of years humans have hunted for honey. They have robbed wild bees and in doing so have often destroyed the creatures that brought the golden harvest. Sadly, this is not all in the past; it still goes on today. What is more wild bees often have their habitats destroyed by farming methods and suffer the ultimate destruction of being smoked out or killed for the short-term gain of one honey collection. A remedy for this situation lies in education. It is obvious that honey-hunters need to learn to be beekeepers. Farmers should also understand the necessity of maintaining a balance in the environment. Much can be achieved if children are taught about the value of bees and the need to maintain biodiversity. It is worth remembering that today's children are the next generation of beekeepers. Development is necessary but keeping an ecological balance is also essential. There is an all too simplistic equation of 'bees equal honey'. This has to be addressed through wider education on the themes of pollination and the value of other hive products. There are, it seems to me, three stages on the road to beekeeping. They are: to kill bees; to have bees; to keep bees.

To kill bees

This first stage just robs the bees of honey and takes the larval and pupal stages for food. Any bees that survive are doomed without food or a succeeding generation.

To have bees

It is a small but important step from the first stage to this stage where wild swarms are encouraged to settle in pots or bark hives. Combs are built directly on to the container so that honeycombs can be removed while brood remains. There is little understanding of the biology of bees and no management of the colony, but at least the bees survive.

To keep bees

This is true beekeeping. It only takes place when the person concerned has some understanding of bees, and can predict certain events and employ well-practised management techniques.

Beekeeping can be lucrative but it is important that the level of technology fits the local culture and knowledge. It should be achieved naturally and not by pressure. Small-scale beekeeping projects are sometimes started with moveable-

frame hives. This means high investment for high potential return. However, without follow-up or input assistance full potentials are not realised. Schemes without instruction and education are doomed because advanced beekeeping equipment requires advanced beekeeping techniques. In essence, the technology should be appropriate. It can be simple and cheap, and generated locally. The main limiting factor is human: a lack of knowledge. This can be remedied by education and the sharing of information. Education materials offered should also be appropriate. The grading of material is essential: forward momentum comes step-by-step going from the known to the unknown.

It is not only beekeepers who require education. There are commercial possibilities arising from processing and marketing bee products, and from supplying equipment to the bee industry. People involved in these activities also need appropriate information. Bees aid plant pollination that results in better-quality seed set. Also reforestation schemes could consider tree species that provide nectar, pollen and honeydew as beekeeping can be a profitable economic activity within the growing forest. Therefore, beekeeping can be useful in fruit-growing and agroforestry projects. Planners and administrators of these projects also need to have some bee-awareness.

The honeybee is probably the world's most-studied insect, and the result of much of this study can be found in the IBRA Library. Although there are a number of excellent projects run by aid agencies and local organisations that are aware of the advantages of beekeeping, they are often in isolation. Their effectiveness could be maximised through better dissemination of information and co-ordination of training. The IBRA office is constantly being approached by individuals, co-operatives, institutions and agencies for help. It would seem that IBRA could play a prime role in an education and information dissemination programme. However, sometimes it is necessary for this input to come from a higher authority. IBRA would like to establish a network for support, co-ordination and information exchange at an inter-governmental level. IBRA is in a unique position because for almost 50 years it has succeeded in establishing credentials of independent integrity that have gained world-wide respect. It could be an honest broker – free from ties to any particular interest – in the development of the beekeeping industry from small local projects to national programmes. IBRA could be not only a resource but also a catalyst for promoting sustainable economic growth and for maintaining biodiversity in the world through a knowledge of beekeeping.