

# Bringing organic honey of indigenous bee origin to the European market

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**A European Council directive issued in 2001 (2001/110/EC) defines honey as "the natural sweet substance produced by *Apis mellifera* bees from the nectar of plants or from secretions of living parts of plants, or excretions of plant-sucking insects on the living parts of plants which the bees collect, transform by combining with specific substances of their own, deposit, dehydrate, store and leave in honeycombs to ripen and mature." Such a simple and straightforward directive has far reaching implications.**

It limits the import of honey to the European markets to *Apis mellifera* honey alone, and prohibits entry of honey produced by other honeybee species. This article discusses the implications of this definition on the honey trade, bee biodiversity, pollination services, and the livelihoods of poor beekeepers in the Himalayan region. We hope that through this discussion, European policy makers will pay attention and understand the crux of the issue and will revisit their definition and open European markets to the poorest of the poor in the Himalaya and other areas who market honey and bee products from other bee species.

## Honeybee diversity in Asia

Asia is blessed with at least nine honeybee species of which four are major honey producers in addition to being providers of ecological services and contributing to the continued biodiversity of the environment. The species producing enormous quantities of honey include the Asian hive bee, *Apis cerana*; the giant hon-

eybee, *Apis dorsata*; the Himalayan cliff bee, *Apis laboriosa*; and the dwarf honeybee, *Apis florea*. Of these four species, the Asian hive bee, *Apis cerana* is the only domesticated and manageable species, and is present all over Asia. The mountainous regions of Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces in China have more than 900,000 colonies of this species (Tan Ken 2003). In countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India, and Pakistan substantial numbers of subsistence farmers derive part of their income from the production and sale of honey. In India alone, according to one estimate, the *Apis dorsata* species produces more than 22,000 metric tons of honey – double the amount produced by all manageable hive bees (Pal and Wakhle 2000). Depriving European consumers of naturally produced organic honey under the *de facto* European definition is fair neither to the consumers nor to the producers of quality honey produced by other species.

## Implications on fairness of trade

Fair trade requires producers, regulators, and consumers to be fair to all and provide equal opportunities for competition, leading to quality goods and their fair price. Prohibiting the flow of organic honey from other species through the existing definition automatically restricts competition and deprives consumers of the benefit of forest honey produced by wild honeybee species in diverse nesting habitats. The definition set by the European Council thus adversely affects poor beekeepers as well as value-seeking consumers of honey. The restriction also discourages the whole honey collection in nesting habitats tradition which is an important incentive for conserving local and wild honeybee species and the immeasurable pollination services they provide to the environment, besides being a livelihood scheme for the poor. Allowing honey imports from countries producing wild honey will make an additional 30,000 metric tons of honey available to consumers from the Indian subcontinent, Myanmar, and China, resulting in better prices and fair competition. This will in turn reinforce conservation



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Valuable pollination services

efforts and lead to better pollination services for local flora and agricultural crops.

### Implications for biodiversity and consumer rights

Evidence of the intricate relationship between plants and bees has been established since time immemorial and further strengthened over time. Pollination provided by bees accounts for the diversity of flora in areas surrounding the nesting habitats of indigenous bee species. Inclusion of the human factor into this historical relationship has provided added benefits to local flora and crops and has contributed to providing people livelihoods through honey and other bee products. Honey produced by domesticated and wild bee species is an important contributor to people's livelihoods, besides adding value to the quality of honey provided to the supply chain of bakeries, food processing, cosmetic, and health industries. Export of quality honey produced by local bee species

**The European directive restricts competition, deprives poor beekeepers access to the European market, discourages pollination services provided by wild honeybees, and deprives European consumers of the benefit of the quality honey that they produce.**

to the European and other markets will trigger and sustain efforts contributing to biodiversity conservation in mountain areas. An example is honey produced by



*Apis cerana* colony managed in a wall hive in Swat, Pakistan.

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*Apis laboriosa*, a high mountain bee species found in Nepal and many other countries of South Asia. On the one side this bee species services the high mountain flora in the form of pollination and produces quality honey with elevated enzyme activity. Honey produced by *Apis dorsata* and *Apis florea* also possesses a significantly higher enzyme content, providing it with the antibiotic content which is a trademark of high quality honey. However, the EU definition of honey denies the European honey consumers this quality honey by limiting their supply to only *Apis mellifera* honey from managed farms.

Honey produced in managed farms is not comparable to honey produced in the natural setting. Elevated moisture levels in the honey produced by bee species like *Apis dorsata*, *Apis laboriosa*, and *Apis florea* should also not be a reason to prohibit their sale in the international markets.

### Our aspirations

Based on these arguments and ICIMOD's discussions with poor honey collectors and producers, it is time to revisit the definition of honey in the European market and provide support to all concerned stakeholders in the honey trade. The moisture content of honey, also defined in the directive, varies from region to region and species to species depending upon climate, nest building habits, and origin of the nectar. Setting a single standard for honey products without considering these realities is therefore unrealistic and inappropriate. Honey is a living product with a diversity of content and enzyme activity and cannot be regarded as a homogenous product in constitution and origin. It is time that the European Council revisited and broadened its definition to open the markets to the aspirations of producers, collectors, and consumers of different types of honey from all over the world.



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A trader selling honey of different floral origin in Pakistan.