

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



Why should bees be protected?

Jan Oberholzer: Bees need to be protected as their numbers have decreased to a point where they have become a threatened species. The expression 'threatened' implies that a species is on a slippery slope to extinction. Each human being should be informed to understand the position regarding bees; otherwise the situation will continue to deteriorate.

The expression 'problems with bees' probably presents the wrong perception. Where ecosystems are damaged, the causes lie squarely on the shoulders of humans.

What are city dwellers doing that justify the accusations directed at them?

Jan Oberholzer: City dwellers are not the cause of the problem. The cause lies with humans in a chain reaction. City dwellers have no causative role in that chain. They do make important mistakes, but do not realise it as they are not well-informed.

If city dwellers had a balanced knowledge most would gladly avoid the problems. Our website www.thebeeman.co.za endeavours to distribute balanced information, but the media can play the most important role.

1. When a colony settles on someone's property that person should not think, which commonly happens, that he contributes to conservation by allowing them to stay there. To leave them there creates the danger that people and animals may be attacked at a later stage; please note, at some later stage! As long as a migratory swarm is left unhindered, they will do the same. They arrive with nothing but their queen. A migratory swarm consists of 1 000 to 10 000 bees, depending on the size of the colony separated from. As soon as a new colony has been established, it starts to build the internal infrastructure, beginning with the honeycombs. Workers bring in nectar, pollen and water from day one and so a balanced household is created. As soon as honey with young bees (unborn pupa) is present, its protection starts and the risk for humans and their pets increases. To remove the colony only then is a consolation prize. It should rather be done as soon as the swarm is first noticed.
2. Of course some people who allow the bees to remain in order to get the honey. In doing so they create a problem when that colony splits up to deal with its growing numbers and the migratory swarm moves on to someone else's property and so the urban bee problem grows. Such a person may be regarded as 'farming' with bees in an urban area, which is illegal. I remember seeing on the Internet that a city in Europe had established a beehive on top of the roof of a city building. This does not contribute to the conservation of bees; it only creates more problems in the city.

3. People often tend to try and solve the problem on their own by spraying bees with household insecticide, or by trying to burn it with anything from paper to even tyres. Such a disturbed swarm will tend to attack people and pets. When they do so they become life threatening. Rather have the swarms in the vicinity of people and pets removed as quickly as possible; do not try it yourself.
4. Anige black lifeform is in greater danger than others. Keep them away from an established colony. The natural enemy is black and bees have an inborn hate for such. In nature the Honeybadger does not only steal honey, but also causes unnecessary large damage to colonies. In the urban area the bees' instinct will focus on black first. When they have a choice between three dogs, the black dog will be attacked first. Bees also become aggressive when they smell cut grass or sweat; the older the sweat, the bigger the risk.
5. Owners of complexes are advised to look out for places that bees tend to choose as ideal for the establishment of colonies. Bees prefer high places as they feel safer there. The only big transgressor in cities seems to be churches. Perhaps church boards are as confused as some members of animal rights organisations. One should not whine about bees if you don't know what you're talking about. Schools and factories with large building complexes are preferred places for bees to establish their colony. They (schools and factories) generally understand the problem and this helps with prevention. High poles, multiple storey buildings en easy availability of sweet matter such as cold drink tins in trash-cans are a welcome convenience. At schools bees may endanger children and the larger concentration of people working in factories and mines are at risk. I repeat that schools and industries generally do what they need to do, which is to have the bees removed. At churches bees mostly settle between the roof and fascia boards. Only a small percentage establishes colonies between the roof and ceiling. For some reason churches tend to leave the bees undisturbed for years. It is commonly found that by the time a church calls on someone to help, there is more than one swarm in the roof, mostly high and difficult to reach even with a ladder

These five factors are the most important. Bees go on the defence if they are not dealt with correctly. Don't think you are conserving the species by keeping them on your urban property. Do not keep them for the purpose of harvesting honey. Shops always have stock. Do not try to kill them off with household insecticide or fire, and if a colony has been disturbed, keep black pets especially out of the way. Identify the transgressors and insist they stop the problem practices.

What dangers do bees pose and what can the media do to prevent it?

Jan Oberholzer: I have already explained the dangers in my discussion of the five largest problems, but the media are sometimes at fault by the absence of enough professional knowledge and solutions on their platforms instead of the many emotional statements. Emotion touches the heart and then the mind will not be able to accomplish much. When media reporting focus too much on figures about extinction and not enough about practical solutions, the problem is intensified. The moment emotions are stirred we receive many calls asking us to remove bee colonies alive.

Because of this Emotion some people tend to think we should render the service for free. The main income of the media comes from advertisers. Our service is highly specialised and we are not financed by anyone. Interestingly, members of the public have told us that 'pest control companies' charge more than us and apparently they just destroy the bees.

You stand sympathetic towards the city dweller, but you point fingers at the links in a chain. Who are those role players?

Jan Oberholzer: Firstly, pharmaceutical companies that produce insecticides irrespective of the effects, as long as it is allowed by legislation. The production of pesticides is an expensive process and I understand that they will consider affordability for their customers.

This brings us to the second link, which is government. For a good role by government one can consider the example of BHC, or Double Bennex, as it was known among the farmers. Researchers increasingly showed that substances of which the active ingredient does not degrade in nature, lead to babies being born with permanent physical defects, including organs, as well as the brain. Stillborn babies were part of the consequences. Research also showed the promotion of certain cancers.

Government reacted by summarily prohibited BHC while there were no alternatives to use on shop shelves. Farmers tried in vain to put pressure on government for alternative substances. Pharmaceutical producers immediately started to experiment with alternative substances and developed Gamma-BHC, which is bio-degradable.

If there is no will, there should be a law. This law needs to be applied. Whereas Gamm-BHC resolved the problem for humans, the result for bees remained as deadly. Because governments are afraid of the influence of farmers and will consequently be less willing to prohibit substances that kill bees.

Organic and biological farming are on the increase and that helps to provide a better way to resolve the problem of bees. However, it seems impossible to reform all forms of plant production to such extent that chemical substances will no longer be necessary.

There is very little comfort in indicating on pesticide containers that the substance may be 'harmful to fish, bees, ...' In the case of the rhinoceros-bird that was also on its way to extinction, we today read SAFE FOR RHINOCEROUS-BIRDS on most dipping fluids, with a picture of the bird.

The third link in the chain is plant producing farmers especially. If the farmers do not put pressure on pharmaceutical companies to produce substances that are safe for bees, the growing contingents of 'green activists' will soon force the first governments to prohibit substances that are harmful to bees.

Wrongful human action is simply the same as sin. It catches up with you!