

Restoring the Balance in Bee Keeping

Honeybees cannot be domesticated in the sense that cows or pigs or sheep have been. They are essentially unchanged by man, despite many attempts to breed them to suit our needs. Their unique mating behaviour and reproductive cycle ensure that diversity and adaptability will continue to be the dominant themes in their evolution.

As I see it, our main job as bee keepers - or bee guardians, or bee herders - is to be observant and to understand our bees to the best of our ability. We cannot fully enter into their world, but we have the opportunity to gain a greater appreciation of it. And once we begin to understand how deeply embedded they are within the natural world, and what sensitive indicators they are of disturbances in the natural world, we may find ourselves unable to image a functional planet without them.

So before launching headlong into the keeping of bees, I would urge you to take a deep breath and consider what it is that really interests you about them, as this will give you some important information about how best to proceed. An hour or two of careful deliberation at this stage could save you weeks or months of time, trouble and money.

To help you decide where you stand on the 'beekeeping spectrum', I have identified six types of bee keeping, three of which fall on the 'conventional' and three on the 'natural' side:

- **Honey farming:** production-focused, intensive management of bees for maximum honey yield or for migratory pollination. Typically involves routine sugar feeding and prophylactic medications, including antibiotics and miticides. Queens are usually raised using artificial insemination and replaced frequently, while drones are suppressed and swarming is prevented by the excision of queen cells or by splitting colonies. Usually involves some movement of hives, sometimes over large distances. This is a business run for profit, and like other agricultural work, there will be good years and bad.
- **Sideline beekeeping:** a smaller-scale, part-time version of honey farming. The principal aim is profit, but your livelihood may not entirely depend on it.
- **Association beekeeping:** a miniature version of commercial or sideline beekeeping, as promoted and taught by most bee keepers' associations. Usually the intention is still to produce the maximum amount of honey, but from fewer hives and not necessarily for financial reward. Queens are often marked and clipped and in most other respects the methods ape those of the honey farmer.
- **Balanced beekeeping:** the emphasis is on bee welfare and facilitating the natural behaviour of bees, with the intention of providing conditions in which bees may find their own solutions. Restrained taking of honey and other bee products only when plentiful and appropriate. Beekeepers may or may not use mite treatments or medications, but if they do, they use non-toxic, natural substances that support bee health rather than target specific disorders. Queens are open-mated, splits optional and swarming may or may not be managed.
- **Natural beekeeping:** similar to 'balanced beekeeping', with the emphasis on 'do-nothing' approaches. Little or no management is attempted, and rarely are splits made or queen-rearing conducted beyond what the bees do themselves. Hives are rarely opened; routine inspections are discouraged; honey is rarely taken; other hive products barely at all.
- **Conservation beekeeping:** bees for their own sake; no honey taken and no

inspections, treatments or feeding. Bees do as they please and take their chances with the weather and forage. Bee-friendly plants may be incorporated in a conservation-style scheme, which may include other pollinator species.

While I have shown these as distinct categories, they should really be thought of as segments of a continuous spectrum, from most to least invasive and from most to least 'production-focused'. It is also possible - at least, in theory - for a honey producer to operate apiaries along 'Darwinian' lines - with no medication and relying on survivor stock - thus closing the circle.

You may notice that in the above list I have not mentioned any particular types of hive. While it is true that certain designs are more suitable for specific applications, it is possible to be a 'balanced beekeeper' using a conventional frame hive, and in France there are honey farmers using Warré hives - a vertical variant of the top bar hive, which was designed for honey production.

It would also be perfectly possible to be an 'interfering' beekeeper in a top bar hive, so I don't think it is useful to categorize beekeepers purely by the shape of their hives or even their personality traits: it is their intention and attitude toward their bees that matters.

The origins of 'natural beekeeping'

Some of you who have read my books and are familiar with my methods may be wondering why I appear to be creating a category of beekeeping - apparently out of thin air - just as we had become used to using the term 'natural beekeeping'. Where did this 'balanced beekeeping' thing come from?

The term 'natural beekeeping' was first (to my knowledge) openly discussed at a meeting of about a dozen interested people at the offices of Bees for Development in Monmouth in 2009. We were trying to find a generic term for what we were all attempting - in slightly different ways - to achieve, and to differentiate ourselves from the conventional methods as widely taught in the UK and elsewhere. While we recognized the paradox hard-wired into the term, we also felt that it encouraged discussion and drew attention to the distinctions we were keen to make.

Ever since that meeting, there has been an on-going discussion about what 'natural beekeeping' actually means - given that no keeping of bees is entirely natural - and just how natural we should be, and what is unnatural about conventional methods. This conversation has generated further distinctions and it has become clear to me that some 'natural' beekeepers have come down - at least tentatively - on the 'no interventions' side of the fence, preferring to observe bees and keep them in containers not designed to be opened very often - or at all, in some cases - while others want to keep bees in a way that still allows for some measure of swarm control, compliance with inspection requirements and with the possibility of the removal of some honey when plentiful.

In short, 'natural beekeeping' seems to have shifted towards the 'conservation' end of the spectrum and created a gap between itself and the 'amateur beekeeping' promoted by conventional bee keeping associations. This is the gap in which, I suggest, 'balanced beekeeping' happily sits.

Balanced beekeeping: bridging the gap

Balanced beekeeping, therefore, allows for the use of a wide range of equipment and methods, while tending to prefer the 'natural' over the conventional. It is for people who want to do more than just observe bees: they want to be bee 'keepers' rather than just bee 'havers'; they want a more intimate relationship with their bees than is allowed by never

opening the hive – while understanding that this should always be done mindfully and not too often. They want to keep healthy bees without resorting to medications, but they also are happy for the bee inspector to call occasionally and check their charges for signs of disease. If a hive becomes bad-tempered and begins to cause a nuisance to neighbours, they are willing and able to replace the queen if appropriate, or move the hive to another location. When combs become black with age and propolis, they can easily remove them. If a hive becomes honey-bound, they can rectify the problem. They know how to raise a few extra queens - should it become necessary - and they can tell when a colony needs some extra feeding and can provide it: they recognize that beekeeping is both a science and an art and constantly strive to improve their skills.

So the point of balance is somewhere between doing too much and doing nothing; being over-controlling and letting nature take its course; being a bee-farmer and a bee-watcher.

I would suggest that the three principles I outlined in *The Barefoot Beekeeper* fully apply to this sector and there is still no need for a 'book of rules' - everyone can decide exactly where the balance is for themselves.

Balanced beekeeping is about working with the natural impulses and habits of the bees, respecting the integrity of the brood chamber, leaving them ample honey stores over winter and generally arranging things in order to cause their bees as little stress and disturbance as possible, while being willing and able to intervene when the bees need help or when their activities are causing a nuisance to others.

Compared to the more 'honey-focused' approaches, more time is spent observing the bees and some operations may need to be performed a little more often: honey harvesting, for example, is likely to be done by taking smaller amounts over a period of weeks or months, rather than the typical all-at-once, smash-and-grab raid practised by honey farmers and most amateurs.

We do not aim to extract every possible drop of honey from a hive. We respect the bees' need to eat their own stores - especially over the winter – and regard sugar syrup as an inferior supplement to be given only when bees are short of their own food, due to prolonged bad weather or other causes.

Supporting other species

Our natural allies are gardeners, smallholders and especially those who understand and use the principles of permaculture, which are also the principles of nature. A mutually beneficial and sustainable relationship with our bees must be based on such a truly holistic approach: we need to learn more about how the colony works as a complete, living entity and the manifold ways in which it interacts with its environment, with us and with other living things. For too long we have been locked into an un-balanced, old-fashioned, reductionist approach, dealing with bees as if they were mere machines created solely for our benefit, instead of highly-evolved, wild creatures, with which we are privileged to work.

I believe that keeping bees for honey should be small-scale, local and carried out in the spirit of respect for the bees and appreciation of the vital part they play in our agriculture and in the natural world. I disapprove of large-scale, commercial beekeeping because it inevitably leads to a 'factory farming' mentality in the way bees are treated, handled and robbed. I believe we should think of honey much less as a food and much more as a medicine, and adjust our consumption accordingly. We should not expect to see supermarket shelves piled high with jars of honey from around the world, as if it were jam or peanut butter. Honey should be valued as the product of innumerable bee-miles and the assimilation of priceless nectar from myriad flowers.

An important aspect of 'balance' is to ensure that our activities as beekeepers do not have a

negative impact on other species. Honeybees evolved to live in colonies distributed across the land according to the availability of food and shelter. Forcing 20, 50, 100 or more colonies to share the territory that – at most - half a dozen would naturally occupy is bound to lead to concentrations of diseases and parasites. Unnaturally large concentrations of honeybees can also threaten the forage and thus the very existence of other important pollinating insects, such as bumble bees, mason bees and the many other species that benefit both wild and cultivated plants. This means that we do not over-stock any location and we create habitat for other species, which may take the form of 'bee hotels' or simply piles of old wood and leaves. Anything that is done to improve the environment for honeybees will also be beneficial to other pollinators.

Having a deep appreciation of the interconnectedness of all living things, and an understanding of the impact our own species has had and is still having, leads us inevitably to the conclusion that we have a responsibility towards everything that walks or crawls or slithers on the earth or beneath it, or that swims in the sea or flies in the air, and shares this precious planet with us. As bee keepers, we have a special responsibility to also be 'earth-keepers'.

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Books by Phil Chandler

The Barefoot Beekeeper (2007)

Learning From Bees: a Philosophy of Natural Beekeeping (2012)

Balanced Beekeeping I: Building a Top Bar Hive (2013)

Balanced Beekeeping II: Managing a Top Bar Hive (2014)

Available from Lulu.com, OfftheBookshelf.com, Amazon

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Phil's blog - <http://beesontoast.blogspot.co.uk/>

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