An African Issue

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A n African Issue

The present issue of Bee World exclusively deals with Africa, the continent that is the honey bees’ *Apis mellifera* original home and that is populated today by many honey bee subspecies. All authors who have contributed to this issue live and work in Africa. In their articles, they discuss conditions, problems, and possible improvements that influence the beekeeping situation in African countries. Africa is, in contrast to Europe and North America, a continent with a growing number of managed honey bee colonies and a plethora of feral colonies. Although these colonies behave differently than European bee colonies, beekeeping could help provide a livelihood for many in the growing African population.

Neil Rusch from University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, has submitted a publication for the second time to Bee World. He presented his insights regarding the knowledge on fermentation practices in Africa in the previous issue; this time, he presents a new hive type that could be made easily from material available in many parts of Africa in abundance. The agave plant has been introduced into many parts of the world and its stem can be converted to a hive with properties that are favourable for housing a colony by investing a relatively low amount of effort and using simple tools. A picture of such a log hive even decorates the cover of this issue!

In addition to honey, bees provide some other products. Pollen seems to be underused in many countries, although a few studies have been carried out on benefits of pollen consumption for human nutrition or even therapeutics. Sofiane Bouazza and co-workers from Djillali Liabes University, Algeria, interviewed 200 scientists, botanists, traditional healers, herbalists, and beekeeping experts to learn more about the usage of pollen in Sidi Bel Abbes. They give detailed reports on how pollen is obtained and discuss the most frequently mentioned reasons why people consume it.

Kehinde Thomas and Sidi Tounkara studied beekeeping in Mali’s Sikasso region. Three-quarters of the rural population they interviewed are regarded as poor. Their results indicate that the degree of poverty increases with age, family size, and beekeeping experience. This indicates that it is hard to escape poverty by beekeeping, especially when the Malian beekeepers become older. From the interviews, the authors identified limitations and high costs in beekeeping equipment and inadequate information as the main constraints for beekeepers in this West African country.

Beekeeping is an important way of generating income for rural populations. But what about the ecological effects of beekeeping? This question was studied by a group led by Clarice Mudzengi in Zimbabwe. One favoured and well-established argument for bees is their high value because of the pollination of crops, and researchers often willingly add the importance of bees for wild plants and habitat protection. This study is an excellent example for this argument. In savanna woodland vegetation in a highveld rangeland, beekeeping sites showed higher basal cover, plant vigour, species richness and litter cover, but lower erosion compared to similar sites where no bees are kept. This can of course not be related to bees’ pollination, but probably is the result of more conservation and management efforts and less disturbance in these ecosystems. Conclusion? Authors recommend promoting apiculture due to its importance in conservation of the natural environment.

There is an active bee research movement growing in Uganda. A couple of issues ago, Agnes Otim and colleagues presented us a first inventory of important honey bee foraging plants and environmental impacts on the honey production in different agro-ecological zones. This time, the group from several Ugandan research institutes presents the results of a field study that facilitate our understanding of honey bee health. Systematic investigations on honey bee pathogens in Africa are rare, but we gain insight into the occurrence of six honey bee viruses in Uganda in this large-scale study. Varroa mites are present in the colonies, but bees seem to cope more easily with the introduced mite than European bees. The investigation demonstrates the presence of five honey bee viruses, with Chronic Bee Paralysis Virus (CBPV) detected in Uganda for the first time. The study suggests a rather recent invasion of the virus in Uganda. CBPV was also the only investigated virus for which the authors could verify an association with colony weakness.

In a study from Egypt, Zeinab Ahmed and her co-workers underline our understanding that diet quality influences bee physiology and survival. They fed beebread from five crops and two artificial protein diets to bees, and one of the latter was fortified with vitamin C. It is important to note that this is one of the few laboratory studies in which the natural food of bees (i.e. beebread) and not corbiculate pollen loads – as most researchers in previous studies have done – is used.

This issue of Bee World is the first one to exclusively feature the works of African authors on topics related to beekeeping in Africa. I hope that the articles could raise your interest in African bees and beekeeping. The global bee community has always been interested in African bees and beekeeping and will closely follow the developments that are taking place in Africa. Later this year, you can expect more content from this continent, although the next issue will bring us to other places and topics on our ongoing journey around the Bee World.

I close with best wishes and an African proverb: One who carries a pot of honey doesn’t envy the sugarcane farmer.

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