

The path of a Ugandan honey pot

Gay Marris, PhD

Royal visitors to the Great Yorkshire Show learn how bees help poverty reduction in Africa

Beekeeping is recognised as being a vital seasonal activity in many regions of rural Africa, where honey and other bee-related products are significant sources of food and income to very poor people, including those in the most extreme poverty groupings.

The International Development Team from the Central Science Laboratory (CSL) and the National Bee Unit (CSL Plant Health Group) are developing overseas projects that expand the income-generating potential of apiculture, to combat poverty in Uganda.

As part of this initiative, CSL presented an exhibit entitled 'The Path of a Ugandan Honey Pot' at the Great Yorkshire Show (11-13 July). Organised by the Yorkshire Agricultural Society, this is the largest farming and country event in the North of England, held on the impressive 250-acre showground on the edge of the spa town of Harrogate.

Our exhibit was put together in collaboration with Linda Whitby (Project Director for the established charity Hives Save Lives, that supplies hives, training



Photo: Crown copyright, courtesy of CSL

HRH The Duchess of Cornwall learns about African beekeeping

and employment to vulnerable Ugandan communities) and Dr Robert Kajobe (Chief Apiculturalist, National Agricultural Research Organisation, Uganda). Invaluable practical help and expert advice was also provided by Claire Waring, who came to the Show on behalf of *Bee Craft* and *Bees Abroad*, and assisted in manning the stand.

ROYAL VISITORS

This year's Show basked in glorious sunshine and was attended by over 135,000 visitors (an all-time high in the show's 148 year history!), as well as its patron, HRH The Prince of Wales, and Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall. The Path of a Ugandan Honey Pot, housed in the Universities' Pavilion (with the theme of Tomorrow's Agriculture), attracted a considerable amount of interest, including that of the royal party and

fellow Ugandan Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York.

AN ANCIENT SKILL

Beekeeping is an ancient skill and time-honoured traditional practices continue to prevail in Uganda, where beekeepers have little access to modern apiculture methods. 'The Path of a Ugandan Honey Pot' illustrated commonly practised honey production methods as found in a typical rural district, such as honey hunting (collecting honey from feral colonies found in trees, caves, etc). Rural people have a good knowledge of bees, plants and places favoured by bees, and collecting honey from wild colonies is a quick way of obtaining carbohydrate and protein at absolutely no financial cost. However, colonies are often killed during harvest, making this practice unsustainable.



Photos: Linda Whitby

A log hive placed in a tree



Freshly harvested wild honey

TRADITIONAL HIVES

Traditional beekeeping is widespread. Here hives woven from bamboo, boruss palms or forest climbers are hung in the branches of forest trees. Although this provides a source of income with no financial input, which can be sustainable, the beekeeper must undertake the sometimes hazardous climb up into the tree branches to collect the honey, and without access to modern bee suits to avoid being stung, grass torches are routinely used to destroy colonies during harvest.

The threats to bee colonies encountered

by Ugandan beekeepers are numerous and markedly different from those met by apiculturists in the European Union (EU): theft, destruction by fire or predation by ants, lizards, toads or even large animals such as chimpanzees being ranked as of greater significance than losses due to disease. Many beekeepers will lose any hives they may have long before valuable honey can be gathered for consumption and/or sale.

Few keepers have extraction equipment, so honeycombs are processed by hand, at home, by the beekeeper or housewife. Traditionally, they are strained through a cloth bag to sieve out bee parts, larvae and beeswax.

HONEY QUALITY

The quality of honey depends on how it is harvested and extracted. Most honey seen in a typical Ugandan market is full of debris or broken honeycomb. Flavour, colour and texture vary naturally, according to the flowers used by the foraging bees.

Honey is packed in Jerry cans, empty soft-drink bottles or any other recep-

tacle to hand. Comb honey is simply put into buckets. Very few beekeepers can afford to buy honey jars.



With jars being too expensive, honey is transported in any available container

HONEY FOR SALE

Once honey has been extracted, it is either retained by the beekeeper for his/her own consumption, or it may be shared with neighbours. Wax comb is sometimes used to make candles, or mixed with maize flour to make ice cream cones. Frequently it is discarded as its value is not always understood. Any excess honey not required for immediate consumption will be sold locally, by the side of the road or at the nearest town market. Alternatively, the beekeeper will travel to Kampala City, to sell honey at the central market, alongside honey from Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as other locally produced Ugandan honeys.

The journey to the capital may be long,



Fruit, vegetables and other agricultural products are widely available from stalls at the side of the road



Photo: Crown copyright, courtesy of CSL

At the Great Yorkshire Show (left to right): Gay Marris, Dr Valentine Aritua, Linda Whitby, Mike Brown and Claire Waring

hot and dusty, but the beekeeper will obtain a far better price for his/her wares (some three times the price at home), if he/she is prepared to make this arduous trip. Dealers in Kampala will buy honey to refine, package and sell to retailers. Buyers may come from other countries, including Rwanda and Kenya, to obtain stocks of Ugandan honey.

As well as being purchased for consumption, some honey is sold to clinics for medicinal applications, such as the treatment of sore throats. Uganda was one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to experience the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS, and many sufferers use the antibiotic properties of honey to treat opportunistic pathogens.

The entry of Uganda's honey into the EU was launched in 2005, following acquisition of the licence permitting importation. However, Ugandan honey remains a rare commodity on the shelves of British retailers.

LIMITING FACTORS

Issues that currently limit the development of apiculture in Uganda are numerous. In the first instance, appro-



A typical roadside honey stall

prate policy and supporting legislation must be in place to allow the expansion of economically viable, sustainable beekeeping practices. There is a need to improve the quality of honey for market, as well as market access. There is a shortage of bee stocks and queen rearing and bee-packaging projects are absent.

Environmental factors that further hinder the development of apiculture in Uganda include indiscriminate bush burning and tree felling. Although requirements for training, information and extension materials remain outstanding, organisations such as Hives Save Lives Africa (HSLA) are striving to address this issue. HSLA is currently working in Uganda, manufacturing hives

that have been specifically designed for local conditions. Protective clothing and equipment, such as smokers, are also made in Uganda, thus providing further local employment. Each beneficiary project receives a package of hives, training and equipment. Ongoing support takes various forms, from colonising the hives to assisting with the marketing of the honey and other hive products.

HSLA works with non-governmental and registered community building organisations, such as farmers' cooperatives, rural development organisations, youth projects, schools and women's groups. For further information about these projects contact info@hivesavelives.com □

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mike Brown - Team Leader, National Bee Unit, Central Science Laboratory, Sand Hutton, York YO41 1LZ.

Dr Robert Kajobe - Chief Apiculturist, National Agricultural Research Organisation, Livestock Health Research Institute, PO Box 96, Tororo, Uganda.

Claire Waring - Editor, *Bee Craft* and Director, *Bees Abroad UK*, Stoneycroft, Back Lane, Little Addington, Kettering NN14 4AX.

Linda Whitby - Hives Save Lives Africa, PO Box 78, Saltdean, Brighton BN51 9AB.

[Gay Marris is a Project Manager with the International Development Team, Central Science Laboratory, Sand Hutton, York YO41 1LZ; e-mail: g.marris@csl.gov.uk]



Photo: Claire Waring

Dr Valentine Aritua and Mike Brown discuss Ugandan honey