

Honey's Hold: Why Become a Beekeeper?



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ABSTRACT

Over time, the number of beekeepers in the United States has steadily dropped because of societal changes. Now, the threat Colony Collapse Disorder is affecting commercial beekeepers and causing them to choose different careers. Without these beekeepers to care for hundreds of hives, bee colonies are being wiped out from their natural habitats by a multitude of pests and diseases. The purpose of this research is to discover what motivates a person to become a beekeeper and how one gets involved in the beekeeping community. Through various interviews with beekeepers and observation at bee club meetings, information was found to reveal that beekeeping experience and equipment is generally gained through family connections. Although this method of teaching is in-depth and helpful, new beekeepers without family training need to be educated in order to save the honey bee population. By learning what inspires one to become a beekeeper, new opportunities for hands-on learning and training can be developed in order to boost the number of beekeepers and save the honey bees from extinction.

METHODS

•**Participant observation** was the first research method used, which involved entering the field of beekeepers. The venues chosen were bee clubs so that I could become part of an experience that many other beekeepers deemed important in their lives. The bee clubs I visited were restricted to the Atlanta Metro area because of the ease of accessibility and the expense of gas to travel to other places to observe. I also attended a "live bee school." I visited Bartow Beekeepers, Cherokee Co. Beekeepers, and Tara Beekeepers.

•**Interviews** were conducted, though it proved more difficult to gather participants. I had to rely on volunteers to assist with my project. Since this class was during the spring, which is the busiest time for a beekeeper, many large-scale beekeepers explained to me that they had little free time. However, they mentioned that summer would be a more relaxing time, and although I will probably visit their hives over the summer, the assistance is too late for help during the school year.

•**Surveying** was used, and allowed me to collect the largest number of participants. To create my questionnaire, I first developed ten different questions to gather information about beekeeping education, inspiration, and demographics. Then along with the questions, I created different methods of answering each question so that I could easily format my final questionnaire. After creating the arrangement of the questions, I created a Survey Monkey account and created an online questionnaire. I posted the surveys on a beekeeping forum and sent the link through emails to bee clubs. I received responses from 48 individuals.

•The sampling frame was nonprobability purposive sampling.

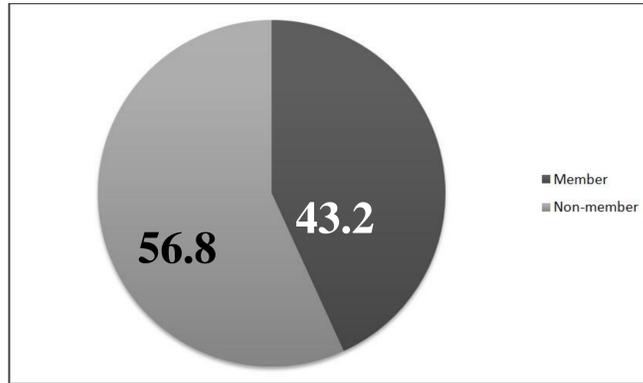


Figure 1 – Are You a Member of a Beekeeping Organization? (n = 44)

"It's almost meditative, in the same way chess is; it allows you to focus your mind utterly on something entirely alien from day-to-day life, yet with extremely concrete consequences for success and failure." -Survey Participant

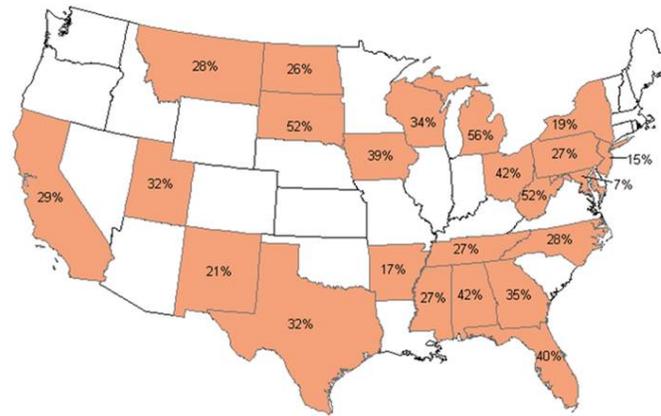


Figure 3 – Bee Decline from Winter 2007-2008
Source: Van Engelsdorp (2008)

REFERENCES

Van Engelsdorp, Dennis, and Jerry Hayes Jr. 2008. A Survey of Honey Bee Colony Losses in the U.S., Fall 2007 to Spring 2008. University of Cambridge 3(12).

Full reference list available upon request.

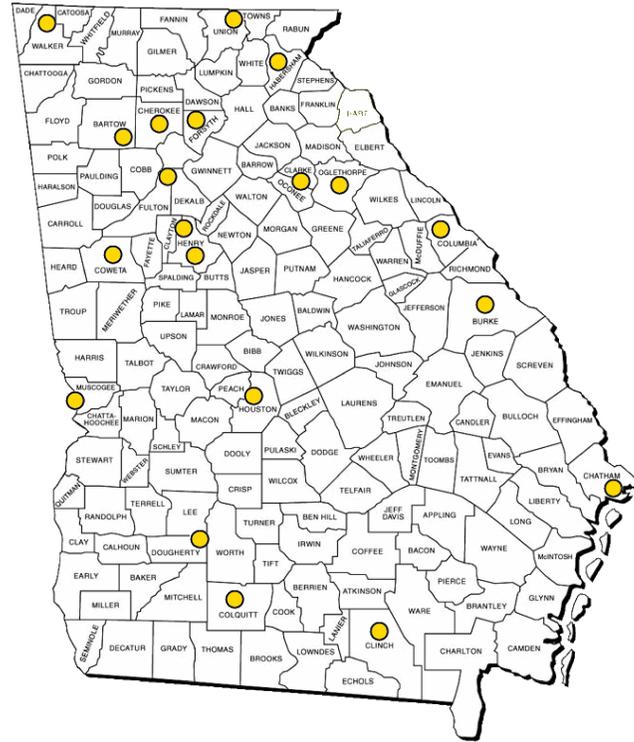


Figure 2 – Map of Bee Clubs in Georgia
Source: <http://gabeekeeping.org>



Figure 4 – *Apis Mellifera*
The honeybee

Figure 5 – Honey Comb

RESULTS

The typical age of bee club members was over 40. The beekeeping meetings were not large, but many friendly greetings were exchanged between members. I came into contact with people who had various levels of bee education, some formal and some informal. For example, Dr. Delaplane, a professor at UGA, has studied beekeeping through higher education as well as through childhood experience.

The interviews gave insight in education and the beginnings of beekeeping experiences. Though it may have been a tradition for the interviewees, they realized that the honeybee population could not depend entirely on generational beekeepers. Instead, they dedicated their free time to helping others learn what it takes to become a beekeeper. This shows that though they fit into the category of traditional or family-taught beekeepers, they are changing the statistics by educating people who are interested in bees and willing to learn through hands-on education; without bee clubs, trying to find someone willing and able to help teach about keeping bees is a difficult task.

The survey gathered more participants than interviews and participant observation. I posted my survey on the website reddit.com under their "subreddit" called beekeeping and sent it to bee clubs. The survey gathered information from 48 respondents (though not all answered every question), 41(85.4%) were male and 7(14.6%) were female. The drastic difference is because of the nature of the website and of the gender difference in beekeepers.

CONCLUSION

This research is important, especially during this time, because of the dramatic loss of bees year after year. By researching beekeeping clubs and questioning individuals, I found the different aspects that attracted people and changed them into beekeepers. The beekeeping profession is not well-known, and I do not think this project will reach many people to change their perspective. However, this research is merely a stepping stone to fuller research on inspiring beekeepers and bringing about change to the world of bees.

My research was limited by the time frame of a single semester and the busy time of the beekeeping season. However, I plan to continue my research into the world of bees and their beekeepers to figure out how I can do my part to help solve their population decline. This research needs more participants to convince everyone of the truth that bees need people, but unfortunately this is something that I cannot complete with my current limitations. Better products to protect bees need to be created, more beekeeping clubs need to be formed, and more individuals need to be inspired. The bees can only do so much on their own; it is humankind's job to step in and help.