

Eve Kelly | November 2019



## To Bee or Not to Bee?

I was having my hair done at a trendy hairdresser in the seaside village of Mt Eliza, Victoria. The salon was on the second floor with large floor-to-ceiling windows that displayed a canopy of spring cherry blossoms. The treetop, alive with activity, was having its fleeting flowers dined on by thousands of bees. Nature was doing its thing in the most unlikely of places. I wondered about the whereabouts of their hive. Was it in a natural hollow in the wild or a human-made box in someone's backyard? My hairdresser didn't know, but he did know of someone in the city who kept bees in their garden. I wondered why urbanites are choosing to keep bees in their suburban backyards.

Bees are fascinating and sexy. From the insect order Hymenoptera, these hairy ladies produce golden streams of honey, can communicate via unspoken pheromone signals and have amazing legs! Specially adapted pollen combs and pollen packers fill pollen baskets on their back legs—it gives new meaning to the term 'take-away'. Worker bees will travel as far as 5km away to find pollen and nectar food. I witnessed the exalted return of thousands of bees at the *Bee Centre* in Moorooduc, Victoria. Bee after bee, legs heavily laden with different coloured pollens of orange and yellow, all clambering up the transparent Perspex tunnel into the humming hive. The hive itself is a simple set-up of a brood box with inserted frames — to which the bees attach wax cells of honeycomb. The art of beekeeping is more complicated. The extraction of honey requires labour and equipment, including suits, smokers and spinners, all available to purchase from the *Bee Centre*.

Australian beekeepers must be registered and follow state regulations. The beekeeping guide *The Contented Bee* recommends properly managed hives, including regular inspections and tests for pests and diseases. Biosecurity is essential; therefore, it's not ideal to move honeybees around—although the commercial industry does, to provide pollination services to farmers and to follow food sources. Hobbyists should inspect their hives for 'swarming readiness' in early spring and summer.

Urban swarms can be a problem. Swarming is a natural reproductive process that assists genetic diversity. But unless the swarm finds a suitable residence in an uninhabited patch of forest—unlikely in the suburbs—it may descend into someone's backyard or inside the wall of a house and end up being exterminated. Peter Smytherman found a swarm of honeybees in a parrot nest box on his land in Clayton Bay, South Australia. With the help of a friend, he carefully transferred the colony into a prepared bee box. The bees stayed, and he now has two beehives on his property. Peter, a former school principal, loves honey but is also attracted to the insect's unique physiology and behaviour as well as the critical role they play in the environment. He worries about what will happen if we lose our bees, "You can't take creatures out of the ecosystem without it having a negative impact", he said.

Some beekeepers have the opposite problem with swarming when half of their bees decide to leave for better digs. Rocco Fasano, a cinematographer, initially rescued an interloping swarm from his friend's farm and set them up at his place in the inner Melbourne suburb of Elwood. Returning from work one day, he spied a fully suited 'bee-rescuer' leaving a neighbour's property. Half of his colony had absconded next door! Rocco continued beekeeping and is now part of a bee community that shares expertise, equipment and honey.

Bees mean big bucks! European honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) were introduced to Australia in 1822 for colonist honey production. Today, according to the online information hub *Bee Aware*, the bee industry is worth around \$95 million annually from pollination services and the production of bee products, including honey, pollen and propolis. With such economic benefits, it's unlikely this feral species will be eradicated any time soon.

The benefits of bees are undisputed. Adrian Taylor owns a hive in Rosebud, Victoria and puts it simply, no bees = no life. "I love what they do and their importance in keeping our food pollinated. Without them, we would not survive, nor would a lot of other species", Adrian says. We rely on bees to pollinate fruit, vegetables, nuts, coffee and native plants. Without bees, there'd be no nectar to feed our native wildlife, no food for us—and no honey. Bees unite humans with nature and encourage us to live organically and to plant more flowers. And when we are closer to the natural world, we are more invested in protecting it for the future.

## References

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