

A VISIT TO A PROJECT RUN BY THE CHARITY BEES ABROAD

Migrating Honey Bees

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Laikipia County, in Kenya, lies around 120 km (as the bee flies) north of the country's capital, Nairobi. It covers an area of over 9000 km², all of which is at an altitude of over 1500 m above sea level.

The population comprises just over 350,000 people. Over half the adult population is women. Poverty is rife, with around one adult in 11 unable to find work. Fewer than a quarter of the population has access to grid electricity for lighting and almost all cook on wood fires. Beekeeping can provide food

and income for rural people living in this area.

Our Visit

As part of the Bee Products Enterprise Development (BPED) project, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), my husband, Steve, and I visited the project to discuss the impact it was having on the lives of people in the region.

The project is run by the charity Bees Abroad, which is a small UK-registered charity seeking to reduce poverty through beekeeping. Volunteer project managers use their expertise,

working with local community groups, to develop viable projects which will become self-sustainable and provide valuable income to people living in poverty.

We arrived just as the bees were returning from their migration. Yes, migrating honey bees. With the advent of rain, after a long drought, the bees were coming back to find a home close to the location they had left some months before.

We met with community groups – mainly mixed gender groups – and they made us hugely welcome. It was a real pleasure to discuss what they

had achieved and what they are planning for the future. We visited several apiaries and watched their delight as they spotted one or two extra hives that had gained new residents in the past couple of days.

African Bees

The bees we saw were a type of African bee, *Apis mellifera scutellata*, and having heard terrifying stories of 'killer bees' since we started beekeeping, I was surprised to stand in several apiaries and watch very ordinary looking bees entering the hives. In fact, *scutellata* cannot be distinguished from our own honey bees by sight, and the patterns on the bees' wings and the size of various body parts have been used to differentiate these honey bee races.

So what makes beekeeping in Kenya very different from keeping bees in the UK?

Kenya-style Beekeeping

This part of Kenya has two rainy seasons (long and short), between which there can be several months when there is no rain, the flowers disappear and the earth becomes scorched and brown. The bees respond

A community group of beekeepers





Kenya top-bar hives

by migrating to the mountains, where it is green and there is forage.

Similar to our swarms, the bees will pour out of their hive, circle high into the sky and fly at great speed to their destination, perhaps stopping a few times on the way. They will leave behind a hive containing empty wax combs. The beekeeper must move quickly if he or she is to get to the wax before the wax moths clear it out. It is a time when the hives can be cleaned out thoroughly, reducing pathogens, getting ready for the bees' return.

Once the rains begin, just like our swallows, the bees fly back. However, they will not fly back to the same hive so the beekeeper has another important job to make the hives so desirable that bees will choose his or her hives, rather than going to a neighbouring apiary. The Kenyan beekeeper will put out a bait hive or two, just as we do here.

The freshly cleaned hives are rubbed with wax containing a lure, such as lemongrass, and the boxes are sited such that the bees can see them. Some beekeepers will warm the hives to release the attractant smell to draw the bees to the hive.

In Laikipia, the change from near desert to lush green foliage is rapid. We arrived as the leaf buds were bursting, following an extended drought, and already the experienced beekeepers were excited at the prospect of the honey they would harvest at the end of the rains. The quantity of honey anticipated seemed to be measured more by the number of hives that were colonised than by any other factor.

Even beekeepers with Langstroth hives do not do weekly inspections. Although the African bees seemed calm to us, they are necessarily more defensive than those in the UK owing to the many predators, such as honey badgers, which can attack the hives. The beekeeper's role is to try to attract the returning bees. *Apis scutellata* has another trait, too. The bees are much more likely to abscond if their hive is disturbed. Since swarm control is not practised, varroa is a lesser problem and the hives can be cleaned out when the bees migrate, then why disturb them?

Hives

We saw four main types of hives, including traditional log hives and Langstroth hives. A



A traditional log hive suspended from a tree

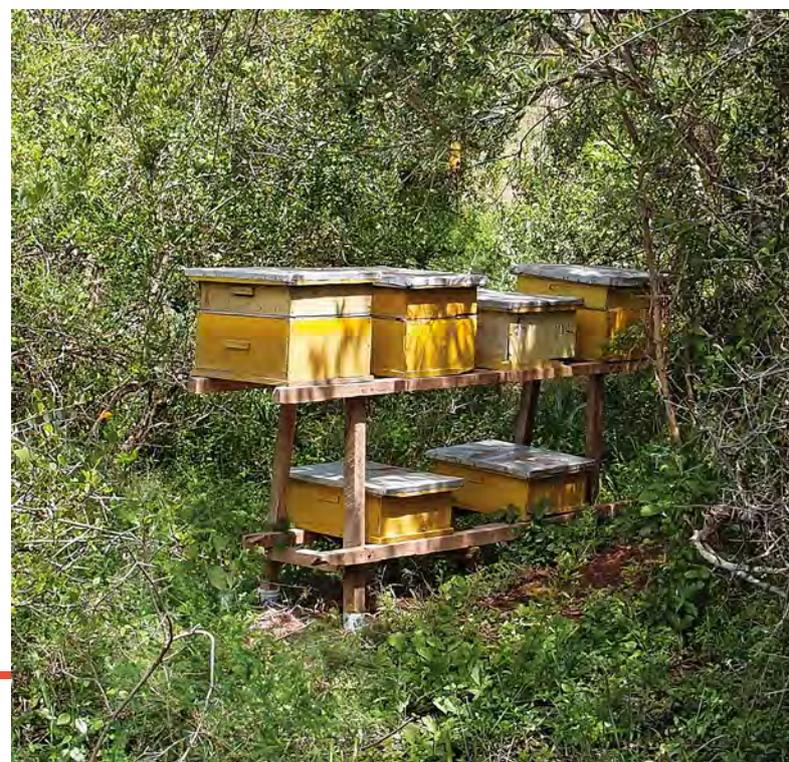
very popular hive is the Kenya top-bar hive. This hive is ideally suited to the usual style of beekeeping and the design can be made locally and at low cost. The top bars are exactly 'as it says on the tin'. They have very specific dimensions and lie crossways along the length of the hive. People like these hives as they are not too dissimilar from the traditional log hives that used to be hung high in the trees. Langstroth hives are popular with some people, while others say that the bees do not return to them. Finally, there are the box hives which are low cost hives made with any wood

that can be found. Box hives are hollow boxes which mimic the hollowed-out logs of the log hives; the bees do not seem to mind and beekeepers are keen to get the wax before the bees return from the mountains!

Improving the Environment

As well as sharing ideas on improved beekeeping, a lot of project effort has gone into raising awareness on the environmental benefits of keeping bees. Tree planting is an important element and it is possible to see the benefits, even after a few years, of the

Langstroth hives





A woman gathering wax from a box hive

individuals highlighted the added nutrition from honey. It was a real pleasure to visit these rural communities and enjoy their optimism and excitement at this new venture.

All the groups are planning to continue and to expand. There are plans to set up co-operatives and the skills and resources needed to make beekeeping a valuable and commercial venture in these beautiful isolated areas are being shared within the communities. With a very large market for both honey and hive products, the future of beekeeping may prove to be a big success in Laikipia region. ❀

trees that have been planted for fruit and for nectar. We visited a displaced community – moved down to the valley from Mount Kenya by the government – and found young men being taught to plant trees that would be for their own lands and for sale. In the parched, semi-arid landscape, you could see where plantations had made the land much more green and fertile.

Extraction and Processing

Beekeeping has been a tradition in the Laikipia region but, until this project started, beekeepers would generally cut out the comb and sell the raw honey, complete with wax and squashed bees as well. The project has shown beekeepers how to collect the comb while saving the bees, filtering the honey and using the wax to make value-added products. Not only do the beekeepers get more money for the clean filtered wax, they use the wax to make body creams, candles, soaps and polishes. Although

the communities have to source other components to make these products, the profit margin on all of them makes it worthwhile.

We watched as some Maasai ladies made body creams from the raw ingredients, heating the various components over a three-stone fire. The resultant products looked wonderful and natural.

Following the drought, wax is in short supply as the body creams are so popular, but even as we talked to one of the groups, a colony of bees started to return to one of the hives close to where we sat.

Positive Results

People are really enthusiastic about the changes that have been made to their lives by this project; it has reached many hundreds of people. Most groups explained that school fees are a real burden and the profits that have been accrued from the sale, even locally, of these value-added products has allowed people to send their children to school. Several



Tree planting

Making body creams

