

Keeping Hives on Private Land

by Colin Goodwin, South Gippsland Beekeepers Inc.

A common proposal to our club members (and other beekeepers) is .."I've got some land and would be happy to have some beehives on it. Are you interested?"

The person making this request may be motivated by a simple interest in encouraging bees and their role in the environment, or they may be hoping to improve pollination for their vegies and fruit trees, or they may be anticipating some payment for the use of their land. Quite often however underlying this request are misconceptions about what is needed by bees and beekeepers.

As beekeepers receive many more offers of sites than they can possibly use, equipping landowners to assess their sites themselves in order to verify whether they are usable for beekeeping, should make any eventual discussions with beekeepers much more effective.

What do Beekeepers need?

All beekeepers are expected to be trained and experienced either formally (courses) or informally (mentoring). Furthermore they are required to register the number of hives they keep, to monitor every hive for diseases, and manage the hives to keep the bees healthy and calm.

However there are different types of beekeepers.

- Small hobbyists will often have a small number of hives (five or fewer) that they keep in at one or two fixed apiaries (beeyards) in a region. Beekeeping is not their main occupation. They will have basic equipment and keep bees for interest, for plant pollination, and to generate small quantities of honey and beeswax.
- Large hobbyists may have 20-50 beehives that they move with the seasons around a series of sites spread across several regions (sometimes called "migratory" beekeeping.) They will have equipment for handling and transporting the hives and (while beekeeping is not their main occupation), it requires a substantial commitment of their time. They will collect moderate quantities of honey.
- Small commercial beekeepers may have 100-200 beehives that they move with the seasons around a series of sites spread across several regions. They will move the hives to specific locations when certain desirable plants are in bloom in order to make varietal honey (e.g. Grey Box, Ti-Tree, etc.). They will have specialised equipment for handling and transporting the hives, as well as a honey extracting and bottling plant. They will collect moderate quantities of honey, and may wholesale or retail this boutique honey. As honey production varies considerably from year to year they will have other activities (swarm collection, equipment sales, hive rental and management) to help them remain commercially viable.

- Large commercial beekeepers may have thousands of hives, and will employ full-time beekeepers. They will move hives around the country (including inter-state) to take advantage of nectar flows (blossoming) on large expanses of private and public lands. They will have large scale specialised equipment for handling (forklifts) and transporting (semi-trailers) the hives, as well as a sophisticated honey extracting and bottling plant. They will have contracts to supply the major honey “packers” (i.e. honey bottlers and retailers) in Australia, and overseas. Some large beekeepers will sign contracts with farmers (e.g. almond growers) to provide pollination services at specific locations and dates, and will manage their hives to ensure they have sufficient bees to provide this service.

The question then, of whether a beekeeper is interested in having hives on a piece of land will meet with very different responses from small and large, hobbyist and commercial beekeepers.

- A suburban backyard or small country property may be of use to a small hobbyist who needs an extra location for 1-2 hives. However the need for regular unscheduled access (day and night) by the beekeeper may be impractical for the homeowner.
- A country property may have an area that could be of use to large hobbyists and small commercial beekeepers if there is a secure area for 10-20 hives with easy 7*24hr vehicle access.
- A large country property with extensive forested areas on or adjacent to the site could be of use to large commercial beekeepers. They will need a secure area for 50-100 hives with easy 7*24hr heavy-vehicle access.

What do bees need?

Even when there is a willing property owner and a willing beekeeper, the site itself has to meet the needs of the bees. This means :-

- Water Availability – bees collect water to carry to the hive, and need things to cling to at the waters’ edge (grass, floating sticks) to do so safely. (Best to keep hives well away from swimming pools!)
- Food Availability - a range of flowering plants that provide nectar and pollen across the year (or at least during the warmer months). Ironically this can be a problem in cleared rural areas that may have an abundance for a few weeks (e.g. a clover flow), and then long periods with very little nectar or pollen available. Urban areas, and rural areas near diverse woodlands, offer the most reliable food supplies.

- Food Safety – no pesticide sprays within 5km; property owner will need to warn beekeeper of any spraying programs on their property and on their neighbour's properties (bee aware app).
- Physical Safety – hives need to be locked away from cattle and vandals; the beekeeper will need copies of keys for their regular visits or in case of emergency (pesticide spraying, bushfire).
- Physical Environment – ideally hives should be located where they receive morning sunlight, but dappled shade in the afternoon. A windbreak or trees and bushes providing protection from excessive winds (especially from wind gusts that can topple hives) is desirable.

What's the deal?

While it is true that the bees do a lot of work to collect and process nectar and pollen, beekeepers also work hard. Beekeepers invest their time in studying bee-keeping, and invest their capital in hives (up to \$1000 per hive), handling equipment (trailers, trucks, forklifts, etc.) and extracting and bottling plant (food-processing shed, extractor, straining and bottling equipment). Several times a year beekeepers are required to visit and inspect hives looking for disease and treating hives when found. They will also spend time managing hives (e.g. replacing failing queen bees, splitting or uniting hives), as well as moving hives between areas as seasonal blossoming dictates.

And all of this happens before the beekeeper can harvest honey (probably only once a year) by taking the upper boxes (supers) to their workshop, extracting the honey from frames, and returning the boxes and frames to the hives for the bees to re-use.

For large hobbyist and small commercial beekeepers (who pay annual fees to have their workshops inspected and registered by the local Council) they then have to strain, bottle and label the honey before they can carry it to the local Farmer's market or corner store for retail sale.

Bear in mind that in many recent years, the changing climate and erratic flowering has meant that bees have not collected sufficient honey to allow beekeepers to harvest honey; which means beekeepers have had to feed sugar syrup to their bees to keep them alive through the winter.

As you will see, beekeepers have to invest considerable time and money for a very modest and unreliable income. There is little or no scope for paying for the use of land. For most property owners the improved pollination of their plants, the enriching of their local environment, and (in good years) a little honey for personal use is satisfactory payment.

Is there another way for me to encourage bees onto my property?

Absolutely! You can

- When planting on your property, try and include a range of flowering native plants (grevillias, callistemons, wattles, eucalypts), and perhaps flowering exotic plants around the house. Your local Landcare office, and beekeeping clubs, have lists of “bee-friendly” plants that provide desirable nectar and/or pollen.
- Avoid or minimise the use of pesticides and herbicides on plants when they are flowering. (Agricultural spraying has been identified as a major cause of bee colony deaths.) If you spray (or are aware of neighbours spraying), use the “BeeConnected” phone app to warn beekeepers in the area. (Free and usable on iPhone, Android, and PC’s. Download from www.croplife.org.au/beeconnected .)
- Rent a managed hive from a small commercial beekeeper, who would then manage the hive for the landholder for a fee. By assisting the beekeeper with their chores you can learn the basics of beekeeping. This can be a stepping stone for the landholder into keeping their own hives.
- Join your local beekeeping club and/or take a short beekeeping course to learn how you can have your own beehives. It’s fun!

Conclusion

Many factors (land clearing, urbanisation, overuse of pesticides) have led to a decline in beekeepers and beehives throughout Australia over recent decades, raising concerns over the sustainability of bees in our environment, and questioning the security of our food supply. More recently however the increase in media coverage of this issue has encouraged property-owners to look for ways that they can help deal with the problem.

In some cases a property-owner may have some sites that could be of use to beekeepers and bees. By using the information in this short document the property-owners should be able to identify which sites (if any) may be of use for bees, and be equipped for a more effective discussion with beekeepers.