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What's Wrong with the Bees? Our New Film, "The Pollinators," Seeks an Answer

If these beekeepers are worried, we all should be: our diet depends upon pollination for one of every three bites we eat.

By Peter Nelson
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"What's wrong with the bees?"

I've been asked that question frequently over the years. My friends, family and most of my work colleagues know that I've been a beekeeper for decades, so it's a reasonable question and it usually leads to an extended and enjoyable conversation about bees and ultimately to food.

I've found that most people are aware there is something wrong with bees and that they should be concerned. What many people don't realize is how dependent our food system is upon the honey bee and how the problems that bees face is putting our very food system at risk.

With this in mind, I set off on a multi-year documentary film project to tell the story of commercial migratory beekeepers, their honey bees and the role they play in agriculture. The resulting film, The Pollinators has been busy on the film festival circuit this year and is just coming out in cinemas across the country now.

Watch the trailer:

A national screening day for "The Pollinators" in the U.S. is taking place on Wednesday, November 6. Find a screening near you here. If there isn't a screening near you, find out how to request one here.

I met beekeeper Dave Hackenberg in a truck stop off I-495 in Massachusetts. He was returning home to Pennsylvania after bringing a truckload of honey bees to Maine to pollinate blueberries, one of the many crops that his honey bees pollinate. Dave and his son Davey are part of a multigenerational family business, which is typical of many migratory beekeepers. Officially called pollination services, the beekeepers work in a niche sector of agriculture. They move millions of bee hives all around the country into the fields and orchards that require honey bee pollination when they bloom. Most people are not aware that honey bees are moved at all because the bees are typically moved at night when the bees are in their hives and often placed in remote areas on the edges of fields where they will be out of sight.

Dave and Davey Hackenberg—like all migratory beekeepers—are an essential link in our food system because very simply, if there is no pollination, there will not be a viable crop.

For many farmers, bringing honey bees onto their farm is somewhat of an insurance policy to guarantee sufficient pollination. The farmer pays the beekeeper by the hive to provide this service. As many as 400 common fruits, nuts and vegetables that we eat every day depend upon insect pollination and represent the most nutritious and tasty foods in our diets. While honey bees have been moved for pollination for decades, the scale and dependency upon pollination services has expanded and become essential in some parts of the country over the last couple of decades. This is due to some systemic changes in agriculture techniques and also the decline of native bees that cannot survive in the chemically dependent monocultures that much of agriculture has moved towards. The migratory beekeepers have responded to these changes in farming and are filling this need through pollination services.

Like most migratory beekeepers, the Hackenberg's and the other beekeepers I filmed, move their bees out to California in February for the almond pollination, which is the biggest pollination event in the world—and also the most lucrative. Beekeeper Bret Adee who along with his family, runs the largest bee operation in the country states that, "Almost the entire US bee supply is moved out to California for almond pollination." Alarm bells should be going off now. After the almond bloom is over, there is nothing else for the bees to eat so they are loaded up and moved into other pollinations around the country.

The bees pollinate many crops after almonds from blueberries, apples, cranberries to pumpkins and also the seeds for next seasons carrots, onions and other important row crops.

Along this pollination journey, the bees and beekeepers can face many serious challenges and risks. I quickly came to realize that these hardworking and iconoclastic beekeepers are anxious about the alarming rate of the bee losses they face, which have been ranging from 33 to 50 percent annually and sometimes more. Not many businesses can sustain losses like this every year. The commercial beekeepers work hard to split and create new hives out of older ones in order to maintain the numbers they need for pollination and try to keep ahead of the losses. They know this is not a sustainable situation and are desperate for other solutions. Thirty years ago, losing 10 percent of one's hives was alarming, but now any commercial beekeeper would be happy to lose that few hives. According to the scientists and beekeepers I spoke with, bee colony losses are due to multiple and interactive causes including parasites, pesticides, viruses, poor nutrition and habitat loss. Climate change is a factor that is being studied, but studies are indeed showing a negative effect on bees. Despite what people may think, the actual movement of bees is not a significant contributor to annual losses and the bees are trucked by drivers used to handling livestock and know how to take care of them.

Beekeepers are eager to get the word out about their plight because their current methods are unsustainable and we are in serious trouble if we don't come up with answers to stem these losses.

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The good news is there are people that are implementing new methods in agriculture and making a positive difference. Former USDA scientist, Dr. Jonathan Lundgren is an active proponent of regenerative agriculture as a key solution. According to Dr. Lundgren, we need

to stop tilling the ground, eliminate excessive chemical inputs, stop planting monocultures and adopt time proven methods of cover cropping, rotation and diversity on the landscape. He believes that we need to fix the soil to fix the bee problem.

A pesticide-free and diverse habitat creates a healthy diet for pollinators and attracts many species of other beneficial insects that can minimize many pests. Specific troublesome pests can be targeted through integrated pest management techniques.

Farmers Lucas and William Criswell along with neighbor farmer Alan Ard have put this into practice and are literally changing the landscape in the Pennsylvania valley where they live and farm. Their successes are inspiring their neighbors who farm traditionally to adopt the same regenerative techniques that are working for the Criswell's and the Ard's.

Dan Barber, the chef and co-owner of Blue Hill restaurant gave me a big picture view of the regenerative farm practices at the Stone Barns Center in Westchester County, New York. He states "We really have to create a system, a pattern of eating that supports the kind of diversity that the landscape needs to be healthy". Jack Algiere, the farm director at the Stone Barns Center, speaks eloquently about that diversity of our landscape and the importance of crop rotation and soil health to create a healthy environment from which we can grow healthy, delicious food and educate and inspire others in the process. Environmentalist and author Bill McKibben gave me his thoughts about how efficiency and simplification in agriculture has eliminated diversity and resiliency at a high cost to the natural world.

There is something about honey bees that touches people: their beauty, their indefatigable work ethic, their efficiency with fascinating and complex societies that are a window into the natural world that we all long for. While most people have heard that bees are in trouble and are interested in knowing more, the threats to bees are a certainly a complex and interwoven set of problems and there are no easy solutions, no silver bullet.

But we also have a lot of opportunities to fix these problems and we have more power to change things than we think we do. Every one of us can do things big and small to make it better. This topic is completely actionable and our own choices really matter. We vote with our dollars when we buy food and make a difference by deciding what we grow in our own landscapes. A green grassy lawns is a monocultures and food desert for bees. Asking questions about our food and learning where our food comes from, supporting local farmers, educating our children and working with our legislators to create pollinator friendly policies in our communities are all key components to changing this broken system. Many states have taken the lead on pollinator protection legislation since our current federal agency's leadership tends to side with corporate interests, so promoting and supporting state and local legislation is proving to be a very effective tool.

The answer is not going to come from the top, but is going to come from our own citizen actions on a grassroots level.

When I started beekeeping over 30 years ago, I had no idea that ultimately it would lead me to making a film about migratory beekeepers, bees and our food system. Yet the intersection of these elements was a story I felt had not been fully explored and one that desperately needed to be told. We can make this better and it has to start with us. Many small changes in our individual lives can add up to make a big difference.

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***Peter Nelson** is a filmmaker, director, and beekeeper.*

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