

Minding the Bees

Beekeeper Chris Harp uses novel, all-natural methods to care for the endangered insect

By: Greg Ryan



Photograph by Grai St. Clair Rice

If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe,” Einstein is rumored to have remarked, “then man would only have four years of life left.” Whether the wild-haired genius uttered those words — and if he did, how accurate they are — is a subject of historical and scientific debate. But let there be no doubt: Bees are in trouble, and that’s bad news for humans.

The recent emergence of Colony Collapse Disorder — a mysterious phenomenon responsible for the deaths of one-third of the honeybees in the United States — threatens the insect’s ability to pollinate fruits, vegetables,

and other foods. The causes of the disorder are unknown; experts blame everything from pesticides to global warming for the sudden decline.

Beekeeper Chris Harp of New Paltz has his own theory. “The two biggest pieces of the picture,” he says, “are stress and malnutrition.” Harp says professional pollinators disorient honeybees by continually relocating them — a cucumber crop in California one week, for example, and an apple farm in New England the next. Those colonies’ developing larvae, meanwhile, consume pollen from only one type of crop. (“I equate that to a human female eating nothing but rice cakes and water while she’s pregnant,” Harp says.) The result is an overworked, undernourished, illness-prone bee population.

If the region’s honeybees are ailing, consider Harp their on-call physician — and one who makes house visits, no less. The self-described “bee doctor” keeps his own colonies, but does not typically sell the honey they produce. To earn a living, Harp offers small-scale colony owners his services as an organic beekeeper, one who uses honey, xylonic acid, and other naturally occurring substances to boost bees’ immune systems. No solid data exists on the efficacy of organic beekeeping (all bees encounter synthetics on their miles-long meanderings, so such a system can never be considered totally “organic”), but Harp’s colonies have proven to be remarkably healthy. “Out of a couple hundred hives,” he says, “I’ve probably only seen four instances of colony collapse — and never in my personal hives in New Paltz.”

Harp is serious about sticking to naturalistic methods. He sometimes performs hive extractions to supplement his income, but estimates that 95 percent of the time he can convince the aggrieved party to allow the hive to remain in place. He never wears gloves while working, and only dons a veil or suit for the first few hours of an extraction, when the bees are still acclimating to his presence. “A suit clogs my vision,” he says. “When you have gloves on, you can’t feel the insect. You squish them, which causes them to secrete a pheromone the other bees smell that says, ‘We’re in danger — sting.’” Despite poking and prodding thousands of bees a day, Harp says he only gets stung two or three times a month.



Now, Harp hopes to inspire others toward eco-friendly beekeeping.

Through his organization, [HoneybeeLives](#), he teaches 20 classes a year to professionals, amateurs, and even children. As one of the only organic practitioners in the United States, he hosts students from every corner of the country. Harp says his classes have generated hundreds of organic beekeeping hobbyists in the Hudson Valley alone. “Chris is incredibly full of love for honeybees, and that comes out in his students,” says Grai St. Clair Rice, Harp’s life partner and the cofounder of HoneybeeLives. “You can see the glow on their faces when they’re learning.”

Whether Harp is staving off doomsday or simply sowing a plentiful harvest, there’s little doubt he keeps honeybees healthy. Somewhere, Einstein must be smiling.