

HONEY


Ain't so sweet for the bees



Illustration: Jamie Coglan

Honey bees live in colonies of up to 60,000, capable of complex social behaviour. Although individual bees are short lived, a colony can continue for many years.

Honey, the colony's food reserve, is stored in a "comb" - an array of hexagonal wax cells. Honey is nectar produced by flowers, swallowed by bees, then concentrated, partly digested and finally regurgitated. It could fairly be described as bee vomit. Beeswax for cell building is secreted by glands on the underbelly of the bee.



From earliest recorded times, humans have manipulated bees for their own purposes. There are several hundred commercial bee farmers in the UK, plus many thousands of small scale "hobby" beekeepers.

At the heart of every bee colony is the queen bee - the only one capable of laying eggs. While the ordinary "worker" bees live just a few weeks during the active season, the queen can live for several years. However, in commercial beekeeping the queens are regularly killed and replaced - some experts advise as often as every six months. New queens are mass produced by specialist breeders under controlled conditions - virgin queens are artificially inseminated with sperm from crushed males. The queen often has her wings clipped off to prevent swarming - the natural way for the colony to reproduce itself.

Sometimes whole colonies are killed off to save feeding them over the winter. When they are kept through the winter, the honey is often removed and replaced with sugar candy or syrup, which are cheaper, though less healthy for the bees.

Beekeepers often transport their colonies to areas of flowering crops where the bees pollinate the flowers, increasing crop yields and earning fat fees for the beekeepers. However, this is to the detriment of local wild bees and other pollinating insects, which are swamped by the temporary visitors.

As with all intensively farmed animals, commercial bee colonies are prone to the rapid spread of disease. The Varroa mite is rife among both commercial and "hobby" bee colonies and is threatening the few remaining wild honey bee colonies.



Honey and beeswax are used in food, cosmetics and toiletries, candles and polishes. Both can be easily replaced by animal-free alternatives. Other bee products such as propolis, pollen, royal jelly and venom are valued by humans for supposed health-giving properties, though it is questionable whether they are of any real benefit - except to the bees themselves.

Vegans use no bee products, preferring to forgo the doubtful benefits and well known risks [such as infant botulism] of substances stolen from bees.

For further information on the vegan diet visit www.vegansociety.com or send an A5 SAE to The Vegan Society, Donald Watson House, 7 Battle Road, St.Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex TN37 7AA Tel: 0845 45 88244

