

Notes: London Bee Summit 2010

LEVEL 5 FUNCTION ROOM, ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL, SOUTHWARK
DECEMBER 16th, 2010

Sustain's new Capital Bee campaign for the first time brought together politicians, scientists, academics, beekeeping associations and local community beekeepers at the London Bee Summit 2010 to discuss the fate of the honey bee and how urban beekeeping could help. What follows is a summary of the day's presentations and discussions. We don't promise that every comment has been recorded but the information below has been confirmed by the day's speakers.

Chaired by Myles Bremner, CEO Garden Organic

Myles Bremner welcomed the audience and speakers to the summit. He said that he would aim to take a holistic approach to discussions on bees and pollinators. Final entries to the honey tasting competition were invited. He explained that Capital Bee is part of the London Food Board's strategy for better food in London. Capital Bee forms part of Capital Growth, which aims to create , new food growing spaces by the time of the London Olympics in 2012. He praised the Guardian's article about Capital Bee, published that morning, for stimulating healthy and active debate on the issue of bees. The chair introduced environment minister Lord Henley to open the summit.

Opening address by Lord Henley, Under Secretary of State for the Environment

Lord Henley opened the summit by drawing connections between recycled hives and the plastics industry, having earlier attended a litter convention. He offered apologies for not being able to stay for the honey tasting. He raised the importance of the Capital Bee initiative and stressed the need for right advice and training. He also encouraged the planting of insect-friendly plants. He pointed to the support provided by DEFRA's National Bee Unit and the British Beekeepers Association. Lord Henley acknowledged the challenges facing bees and other pollinators, including landscape and disease, and said that protecting the environment and restoring biodiversity are vital. Lord Henley asked beekeepers to register on BeeBase at FERA.

The chair opened the floor for questions to be addressed to Lord Henley.

Q. A member of the audience asked why, despite warnings from the British Medical Council, the public will not have to be notified when pesticides are sprayed nearby.

A. Lord Henley noted that best practice is employed by demanding notification where possible and that DEFRA has one of the toughest pesticide regimes in Europe.

Q. A member of the audience asked why Neonicotinoids (pesticides) have been banned in Germany but not in the UK.

A. Lord Henley noted that appropriate action would be taken where there was scientific proof.

The chair closed questions and invited speakers to address the audience.

Dr. Opi Outhwaite, Greenwich University

Honey Bee health in England: what role for regulation?

Dr. Opi Outhwaite noted the winter of 2007-2008 where 30% of colonies were lost and that although there has been something of a recovery, there is still an approximate decline of 20%, with regional variations. She discussed the prevalence of pests and diseases and how the current legal framework is a large

contributing factor. Dr. Outhwaite called for notification to FERA of suspected detected pest and disease, enforcing mandatory destruction if severe. With regard to DEFRA's Healthy Bees Report and 10 year plan to attain the lowest achievable level of pest and disease, Dr. Outhwaite pointed to key challenges in registration and regulation:

- Control rests on preventing entry to the country to avoid establishment and spreading.
- Appropriate husbandry practices to be applied.
- Beekeepers awareness of responsibilities and contact with the authorities.
- Authorities targeting of and response to outbreaks.
- Half of beekeepers are not currently registered.
- Unknown beekeepers can not be notified.
- Hive products; honey can harbour pests and pathogens that cause diseases.
- Honey is only subject food restrictions and not animal restrictions which is inappropriate.

In summary, there is a heavy reliance on voluntary action and without wanting to over-regulate, Dr. Outhwaite felt that it is necessary to further discuss how current regulation deals with risks.

Mike Brown, FERA

DEFRA's bee health research and the FERA Bee Unit

Mike Brown described FERA as a multi-disciplinary agency including food safety and consumer protection. It also encompasses plant, health and seed inspectors, as well as analysis of plant and food samples. The primary role of the National Bee Unit is to protect the honey bee which represents a huge commodity including wax, pollen and royal jelly. This is also part of the aim of ensuring pollinator diversity and biodiversity. Mike Brown emphasized the care needed in the sourcing of colonies. The NBU also acts as a regulatory body of pests and diseases and recognises controller pests. Integrated services involve the field team who provide advice and carry out inspections, lab diagnostics, looking at molecular methodologies and research projects on pollination studies that focus on bee health. Risk-based inspection routes intend to prevent 'spread-out'. The overall philosophy is to provide a catalyst for good beekeeping practice and that knowledge and skill be applied like any other livestock. Mike Brown noted that NBU is responsible for England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own programmes.

The chair commented that every one of the staff is an active beekeeping practitioner.

Nick Mole, PAN UK

The role of pesticides in bee decline and PAN UK's London parks campaign

Nick Mole heavily criticised the use of neonicotinoids. He also stated that despite pollination accounting for £ 141 billion of the UK's economy, there are 40 pesticides in use which are toxic to bees, referring to the film, 'The Vanishing of the Bees'. He gave global examples, such as India's pollinator decline and subsequent reduction in crop yields. In Europe, the French banned Gaucho following EU beekeepers' requests to have it withdrawn after the death of 99% of bees. Paris has been pesticide free for the last 10 years. Despite this, there has been no withdrawal in the UK and there needs to be legislation to stop use in certain areas, such as parks. Nick Mole questioned when government would stop 'kow-towing' to the agrochemical industry and take action, to cheers and applause from the audience.

Nick Fraser, National Trust

'My husband says that organic is a load of nonsense' or, Chemical-free park management, and what we can learn from Nunnington Hall

Nick Fraser opened his presentation talking about valuing people's connection to nature and The National Trust's sentiment of cherishing, protecting and enriching the natural world. He went on to describe in detail his work in the north Yorkshire moors: the chemical-free Woodland Walk and the organic approach at Nunnington Hall in Rydale. Nick Fraser discussed perceptions of the word 'organic' and vegetarianism. He dispelled myths about the notion that organic gardens are messy. His examples of organic approaches

included: composting systems that bring soil back to life, the use of compost teas, comfrey, plant tonics and molasses. He described how it has taken years to find the right balance, citing nitrogen enriched blooming roses and bird habitat boxes providing the solution to aphids. He felt strongly that with good engagement, the public will understand the effectiveness of chemical-free management, such as at the Chelsea Flower Show 'Bee part of it' campaign and the Innocent-sponsored hives, 'Buy one, get one bee.' He also commented that city hives have been more successful than their royal counterparts and that outlying agricultural land can benefit from a pollinator rich urban environment. He concluded that the argument for intensive chemical use is continually becoming less convincing.

Tim Lovett, BBKA

Responsibility and the need for training

Tim Lovett reviewed how BBKA services to members have become more focused on training and education and some lobbying, rather than just insurance. He discussed how the United States had lost 70-80% of commercial colonies and that continually relocating bees- which is common practice in the US- may be a major stress factor. In response to the issue of pesticides, he felt that a pragmatic view should be taken in that they are in use but our efforts are best directed to ensuring correct and safe use. Amongst challenges to bee declines are pests and diseases, lack of research, poor weather and impoverished habitat and forage. He pointed to the importance of being a good beekeeper. Following a BBKA colloquium in 2007 involving researchers, the Government and experts the BBKA campaigned to secure improved research funding which was forthcoming in the form of more money for the National Bee Unit and the £10M Insect Pollinators Initiative. With between many more new beekeepers anticipated next year, Tim Lovett impressed the need for competence, responsibility and sustainability. He felt that more trainers will be needed and efforts made to set up new beekeeping associations, reviving the moribund ones; improved training materials will be required, good sites would need to be identified; and more local bees are needed. He discussed the BBKA's democratic structure in place through branches. The BBKA has developed materials for regional education. He closed heralding the 'Course in the Case', a five-stage educational tool starting on white for novice, through to black for expert.

Karin Courtman, London Beekeepers Association

The role of local beekeeping associations

Karin Courtman discussed why the rapidly increasing numbers of beekeepers should connect with local associations and that they should feel free to attend diverse local associations. She commented that the democratic structure is the best way to access support and qualifications, and that beekeepers should challenge themselves to be the best beekeepers that they can be. Karin suggested that new colonies of bees may affect the total quantity of honey that existing beekeepers might enjoy, but she emphasized the need for harmonious relationships with the community, brought about through cooperation, education and swarm control. (Relationships could be damaged as people are frightened when bees swarm). She raised other key issues such as bee treatment, competition in beekeeping, potential disease threats, the use of herbicides on grass reducing forage for bees and how planting increases pollen and nectar. She pointed out that money is not a motivator for most beekeepers. Karin Courtman in conclusion welcomed new members to the London Beekeepers Association and reminded the audience about their mentorship programme for beginners.

The chair opened the floor for questions to be addressed to any of the speakers.

Q. Dirk Campbell from Lewes in East Sussex stated that swarming is not dangerous.

A. Tim Lovett (BBKA) responded saying that swarming bees is a natural process. It gives the beekeeper the opportunity to demonstrate in a 'Svengali' way regaining control of his bees. There are few feral hives which go untreated and are a possible source of disease.

Further comments:

Dirk Campbell questioned whether feral hives are indeed diseased.

John Haversham from the audience contributed that his research shows that they are not diseased. Mike Brown (FERA) added that a PhD student from Leeds was researching that thesis and that the answer would be available in two years time.

Q. Harriet Copperman asked when the BBKA would be 'coming off the fence' about neonicotinoids.

A. Tim Lovett (BBKA) answered saying that BBKA has never endorsed neonicotinoids. BBKA members ultimately determine policy in this area. The BBKA has asked for more research into the effects of pesticides on bee health which is underway at the Universities of Dundee and Keele.

Q. Camilla Goddard expressed concerns about suppliers of bees from abroad; New Zealand and Hawaii, for example.

A. Mike Brown (FERA) stated that imports have stopped, although they are still legal from EU member states and some other countries, making genetic mixing inevitable.

Dr. Opi Outhwaite added the importance of knowing regulation.

Q. Catherine (River of Flowers) raised concerns over pollinator competition presented by honey bees, and their effect on the 'indivisible unit' created by wild flowers and pollinators.

A. Tim Lovett (BBKA) pointed out that there were historically more than 1 million honey bee colonies in England, and other species seem to have survived this greater number. He added that a general improvement is needed on agricultural practices, which have destroyed habitat for all pollinators and other insects. He stated that with improvements to the environment it should not be an either/or situation for honey bees and other pollinators, rather and/and.

Karin Courtman (LBKA) added that there is not substantial evidence to say that there is competition from honey bees, and that other pollinators are able to take pollen from where honey bees cannot.

The chair closed the first half of the summit for a break, inviting the audience and speakers to participate in the 'just for fun' honey tasting competition and to enjoy the displays on offer.

The chair reconvened the audience and speakers for the second set of presentations and talks.

Elinor McDowell, Bungay Community Bees

A business model for community beekeeping

Elinor McDowell relayed to the audience how the initial plan had not turned out as expected, but actually better. She gave an account of how the project evolved in 3 stages, allowing it to capture imagination and develop where it would. Community apiculture offers opportunities for education and awareness; honey production is not a key motive, but a bonus. The project is based on the fundamentals of groups and support and is strengthened by the diversity of its members. In 2011 they will also use top-bar hives as a method of more sustainable beekeeping, one advantage of which is the observation panels for children. The community group is currently engaged in extra forage planting to make extra feeding unnecessary.

Tim Baker, Charlton Manor Primary, Greenwich

Bees in schools: teaching, learning and safety

Tim Baker offered an inspirational insight into how disused outdoor space and an asbestos-condemned music hut had been transformed to create a green space and garden at the school. He described how year 5 students had worked together to design a maze garden, accessible for the physically disabled. Tim Baker recounted events such as children gathering swarms and reassuring adults as to the safety of the bees. Working with bees and the infrastructure to support them, such as building frames, has allowed certain children with learning and self-esteem issues to flourish. A shelter has been built that allows children to observe the entire process safely and provides protection from the elements.

Steve Benbow, London Honey Company

What makes a good site in a city and bees on rooftops

Steve Benbow shared how an image of New York roofs in *ABC XYZ* had inspired him to start beekeeping. He noted that the twentieth story is about the maximum height for beekeeping. Having started commercialising approximately ten years ago at his first hive on Tooley Street, Tower Bridge, he now manages 850 hives throughout the UK with one other person, including organic estates in Shropshire (with up to groups of 25 hives in the countryside). He described how they move bees around the country in small numbers, up to 50 at any one time. Modified Dadant hives produce up to 70kg of honey each per year. Steve Benbow pointed out that he is very conscious of the community around him.

Heidi Hermann, Natural Beekeeping Trust

The bees' challenge to us

Heidi Hermann focused on our relationship with bees: as the primary contributors to pollination, she cited them as our link to food and life. She commented that the bees' message to us is that we need to reciprocate, as our gesture to bees at the moment is all about taking and that bees need help to recover. She voiced concerns that the majority of beekeepers kept bees fed on sugar through the autumn and that large honey harvests mean taking most of the bees' honey and replacing it with sugar. Heidi Hermann asserted that responsible beekeeping should not depend on that approach and that bees should not be expected to pay for themselves as a hobby. She expressed that the aim should be for a more healthy and natural world and that our wastefulness is contributing to the toxicity of our environment. She noted she was inspired by Nick Mole pushing the environmental agenda, as it is being poisoned and reverence for it should be developed. Heidi sat down to cheers from the crowd.

Sue Walton, Buglife: the invertebrate convention trust

It's not just honey bees! How bee-friendly behaviour can help other pollinators too

Sue Walton opened her presentation with the statement 'Life without coffee, chocolate and strawberries', talking about the chocolate midge and the strawberry hover-fly to highlight pollinators' link to food. She discussed the existence of pollinators for specific plants and the breadth of variety: thick-legged flower beetle, fruit-bats, hummingbirds, bumble bee, cockroaches. She stated that creatures pollinate plants more than wind and water. She shared the vision of creating corridors of wildflowers allowing nationwide pollinator distribution. Sue Walton noted that there are 250 pollinators at risk of extinction as well as a significant decline in bumble bees, butterflies, moths and hover-flies.

The chair thanked speakers and re-opened the floor for final questions to the speakers.

Q. Mike Fullagar asked how to do integrated pest management the natural way.

A. Suggestions included looking at bio-dynamic methods in Germany and allowing swarming as a brood interruption to counter Varroa.

Q. Leanne Parker from LSE asked the speakers what they had learned for their own lives from working with bees.

The chair suggested that this be the final question and asked for a response from each speaker.

A. Steve Benbow – 'Order', Tim Baker & Elinor McDowall 'Community', Heidi Hermann 'Love, the natural world and interdependence, and Sue Walton 'Variety is the spice of life.'

The chair asked Rosie Boycott to speak and award the London Honey tasting prize.

Rosie Boycott, Chair of the London Food Board

Award of People's Prize for the London Honey Tasting

Rosie Boycott drew attention to the practice of pollinating by hand taking place in China due to the absence of animal pollinators. She announced the Capital Bee campaign's community beekeeping competition for 50 London communities to win apiary equipment and support. The competition closes at 5pm on the 28th

January; winners will be announced in February 2011 and hives will arrive in spring 2012 after new beekeepers have completed their training. She highlighted the benefits of beekeeping for children and confidence. Rosie Boycott announced the winners of the London Honey Tasting competition.

Runner-up – Clive Cohen, with his Dark Holloway Honey

First Prize – Roots and Shoots, with their honey from Kennington.

Rosie closed the summit giving special thanks to:

Southbank Centre for hosting the event

Simon Warren, the photographer

The Co-op Membership's Plan Bee for providing wine, prizes and refreshments