



THE RISE OF BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN BEE FARMERS

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At Pretoria's Rooiwal Agricultural Village, Mokgadi Moloko Mabela is inspecting a row of beehives whose future inhabitants will pollinate produce grown in nearby plastic-covered tunnels and surrounding fields. Friendly and chatty, Mabela, 30, is relatively new to beekeeping, although the vocation runs in her family. Six years ago, she was working for Pretoria's Department of Human Services when her father fell ill, leaving no one to take care of his 450 hives. Mabela decided to learn the trade, falling so deeply in love with beekeeping that when her father recovered, she launched her own startup — Native Nosi — in December 2015.

Beekeeping in South Africa can be sticky, though: The Cape Agency for Sustainable Integrated Development in Rural Areas reckons that viable operations need at least 350 hives producing honey that can be sold for a minimum of R45.00 per kilogram (\$1.50 per pound). Mabela tends a modest 100 hives, although her toothsome liquid fetches more than \$4 per pound. She is proud to be part of a growing movement of previously disadvantaged bee farmers turning to creative funding mechanisms to achieve commercial parity in a white-dominated field.

Bees and beekeepers are essential to South Africa. According to the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), honeybees pollinate more than 50 of the country's top crops,

including nuts, berries, citrus and oilseed. ARC's Mike Allsop guestimates that commercial, managed honeybee operations contribute up to \$1.5 billion to the economy each year (nearly half in the Western Cape province alone).



Mokgadi Moloko Mabela, founder of the Native Nosi beekeeping company, climbs into her bee suit at the Rooiwal Agricultural Village in Pretoria, South Africa, where she captures wild bees pollinating surrounding crops.

And yet a 2008 report from the South African Bee Industry Organization (SABIO) noted that commercial beekeepers lack the resources to support the pollinators at levels required by the agricultural sector. In trying to address the shortfall, Allsop says, government agencies poured millions of rands into unsustainable development projects designed to churn out beekeepers — known locally as development beekeepers. “Some 20,000 development beekeepers have been trained in South Africa,” he says, “and there’s not [enough] forage to keep them.”

Mabela says beekeeping “takes time, it takes money and it takes a lot of passion and dedication.” She is constantly brainstorming innovative new ways to raise funds. In addition to drawing in orders through social media, Native Nosi works with the People’s Fund crowdfunding platform to solicit financial support. She raised 186 percent of the first campaign’s \$2,000 target, allowing her to purchase 30 hives and a settling tank, where harvested honey “rests” for up to 36 hours before bottling. Now, she’s in the midst of a second fund-raising campaign, which asks investors to sponsor a hive for about \$88 and reap a portion of the rewards over six years. If all goes well, in two months her one-woman operation could buy 1,000 hives — and her success would have wide-ranging implications for the country.

and Makhoba supplements that income with chickens — broilers and layers — as well as fruits and vegetables grown in her garden.



Mabela inspects her hives. If wild swarms don't take up residence, other insects sometimes take over.

African Honey Bee started with two interest-free loans from the Industrial Development Corporation, which Stubbs will pay back after reaching 30 percent profitability. Another source of revenue: The giant paper company Sappi commissions Stubbs' outfit to protect its eucalyptus groves from honey hunters who accidentally burn down trees when smoking out bees. Ideally, Stubbs says, he'd partner with a group like Whole Foods. "They can market themselves and what they're doing to help communities," he says. "And we'll get sufficient markup on the product to be self-sustaining." So far, 1,150 beekeepers have completed his program. Still — overall — the industry remains very much whitewashed.

In their 2008 report, SABIO counted just 20 professional beekeepers operating 1,000 to 7,000 hives. It's unlikely that any were Black South Africans, according to Allsop. He says updated statistics do not exist, but he knows of only a few Black beekeepers working

beyond the 300-colony level. However, over the past eight years, he has seen “a whole lot of really decent business partnerships” help small-scale, nonwhite beekeepers grow.

As for Mabela, she deeply respects her father for putting three daughters through boarding school as a subsistence beekeeper during apartheid. He, in turn, is befuddled by her Facebook and Instagram accounts, but she has no intention of staying small. “I want to be the biggest Black bee farmer in all of Africa,” she says, standing tall and confident in her crisp white bee suit.