

It's The BEES' KNEES, HONEY

BY PETER SULLIVAN



The African Honey Bee project came to me by a chance donation of \$10,000. “For the bees,” she said. After looking into this project, the best description seems to be that 18th century phrase: it’s the bee’s knees.

There are a lot of the little honey makers, so the bees’ knees seems more appropriate to this, a project that has moved 1,200 rural families into making money as marginal farmers.

The impact is immense on the lives of the 1,200 affected families. And on the community. And on the environment. And on the likes of Sappi and Mondi who have vast tree plantations that risk being burned down by ignorant bee-hunters.

Wonderful honey is produced by this project, the real stuff, unadulterated, unfiltered, unheated, unpasteurized, unmixed with sugar or irradiation.

I learned a few things very quickly on my visit to bee farmers near Richard’s Bay in a village called Sokhulu.

One, most honey in South Africa’s supermarkets is adulterated, most of it imported from China.

Two, honey is ‘green’ until the bees cap the cell with wax. Chinese farmers use green honey as it weighs more. This is not good. Chemicals are added to stop it fermenting.

Three, why do bees go woozy in smoke? It is because bees think their hive is at risk so they quickly gorge on the honey, making them clumsy and drowsy

and disinclined to sting or defend. Greedy little buggers, really.

Four, we have two kinds of bees in South Africa. The African bee and Cape bee. Both are considered aggressive compared to European varieties.

The way this project works is based on six ‘workshops’ given to locals.

The first workshop acts as a self-selection process. Those who come learn to make a protective veil and gloves from old clothes and kitchen curtaining, plus a smoker from a tin and a ‘hive tool’ (a sharpened metal thing to open the hive). If they don’t attempt to make those things, they don’t progress. Simple. Successful ones get to make their first hive from a flat-pack. Those who come expecting a handout leave, and go looking for pots of gold at the end of rainbows made up of political promises.

So those who have ultimately selected themselves, go on to Level Two – and learn to catch and manage bees. After completing a test they go to level three.

Level Three is about harvesting. They must get 100% for the test because it is about food safety and hygiene. Level Four is about a business plan (everyone sees how a sandwich business can turn R40 into R80 in a day). Level Four also teaches them to make a mobile chicken pen and garden towers. Five is about record keeping and the final Level Six focuses on advanced beehive management.

The change is people’s lives is

dramatic. From lethargy to being productive, from dependency to self-sufficiency, from a complete lack of money to an income of sorts, honey, food from the tower gardens, eggs from the chickens, and a sense of purpose.

One farmer told me he had sold 60kg of honey this past season (January to June) at R45 (\$3.50) a kilogram. The African Honey Bee people buy all the honey, although farmers can sell it elsewhere. They generally lack the sophistication to market their own honey. Some two tons of honey was produced in the Sokhulu area over four months this year.

Tower gardens are really sacks with soil in them, a bucket of stones in the middle, grey water from washing is used and after planting seeds, towers overflow with cabbages, squash, onions, tomatoes.

Bees love plantations. Trees produce an enormous number of flowers packed densely together.

Income from honey, chickens and veggies provides the necessary cashflow that allows small-scale timber growers to postpone harvesting trees from four to eight years, enabling them to quadruple their returns.

‘It’s the bee’s knees’ comes from the 18th century and meant something very small and insignificant. Its meaning changed in the 1920s to mean an outstanding person or thing.

This African Honey Bee project is indeed the latter. **P**