

The National Herald

While Bee Colonies Fade Elsewhere, Greece Has A Buzz On

Brenda Marder

Almost directly after its founding in 1904, the American Farm School introduced bee cultivation to its students and the subject has remained a vital part of the curriculum. Why so? Because Greece has historically remained one of the great centers in Europe for the export of honey, producing today 12,000 to 15,000 tons per year, large amounts of which are exported. With 1.5 million hives, Greece holds the honor of ranking second in Europe after Spain, which holds center spot with 2.3 million hives. France ranks third. To get an even better perspective on Greece's honeybee industry, called apiculture, it is instructive to note that the country claims the greatest hive density in the world. Due to its flora, warm climate, abundant sunshine, extremely varied landscape; Greece asserts that of the 7400 varieties of plants thriving in its soil, many can only be found in Greece.



AFS Beekeeper Babis Misirlis (C) shows U.S. teenagers on the Greek Summer program the inner workings of one of the campus beehives.

Naturally with this resource, the country is also a leader in Europe for research and scholarship for apiculture, the scientific name for the science derived from “api”, the Latin word for bee. The modern Greek word for bee is melissa. The sensational news about Greek honeybees is that they have continued to survive, nay, thrive, while in contrast, in the United States, bees since 2006 have buckled under the catastrophic colony collapse disorder commonly referred to as CCD. American beekeepers claim that the disease since that time has stricken 40 to 60% of commercial beekeepers. Tentative news broke at the end of January 2011 that, according to Professor Colin at the University of Montana, the cause may be due to a lethal combination of a parasite and a virus, but that diagnosis thus far has not been credited as conclusive and other claims have been offered. The toll on the bee population has been reckoned in the billions in the United States and some areas in Europe have also suffered from CCD. While the honeybee's economic value lies in its production of honey and bee wax, more critically it is simply irreplaceable as a pollinator of fruits, nuts, vegetables, forage crops, and countless uncultivated plants that prevent erosion.

To check on the bee situation in Greece, last summer my husband, Everett, and I visited the leading Greek expert on bees, Paschalis C. Harizanis, Professor and Director of the laboratory of Sericulture and Apiculture at the Agricultural University of Athens, sericulture being the study of silkworms. An internationally respected scholar, Harizanis has benefited from both Greek and American studies, a combination that has given him that extra edge. His first instruction in bee culture began at the American Farm School in Thessaloniki, where he received his high school education, graduating in 1969 with solid background in both the theoretical as well as hands on experience at the Farm School's extensive bee facilities under the tutelage of the Farm School's bee specialists. At that institution, students learn all aspects of bee culture from classroom theory to building of hives, to marketing the honey, the final commercial product. After graduation, continuing his studies, Professor Harizanis received a BS in General Agriculture from the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, followed by a Masters of Science in Entomology in 1978 from the University of California, Davis and continuing at the same university he earned a Ph.D in Entomology in 1981. Many bee experts both in Greece and abroad have profited from his extensive publications, and the numerous seminars he conducts for Greek and Cypriot farmers, and his participation in international conferences. "I am stimulated by the brilliant students who study with me at the Agricultural College here

in Athens. Many Greek students specialize in apiculture and enter some aspect of the field when they graduate," he says. "Young people are especially intrigued by the ever expanding medical applications of bee venom deemed helpful in problems such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, gout, shingles, burns, and other maladies." In fact, history tells us that bee venom therapy is hardly a uniquely modern technique: historians have described the uses of bee venom therapy in Ancient Greece. As Greece does not suffer from CCD, Professor Harizanis has not conducted in-depth studies of the phenomenon. "Since the Greek government has forbidden genetically modified produce, if genetically modified plants are indeed part of the CCD problem, it stands to reason that Greece's bees would not be compromised," he claims. It is helpful to note that honey functions as a healthy "pick me up." As a source of energy it is certainly better for you than sugar, and tasty, when spread on bread, poured into coffee or tea, and can be used in recipes for sauces and stuffing to mention just a couple of culinary uses.

So Greece continues to be a leader in Europe in the production of honey and through exporting the product brings into the country a much-needed inflow of money during these hard economic times.

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April 21, 2011