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Bees mean business in Wales

By Pete Barrar and Peter McFadden – Conwy Beekeepers' Association

The ancient craft of beekeeping is undergoing a revival in Wales. Demand for local honey greatly outstrips supply, and this has led to high prices at farmers' markets and specialist retailers.

Most beekeepers in Wales are small scale, with just a few hives. About 20 bee farmers run over 40 hives of bees each; and there are about ten very hard-working fully commercial beekeepers, with over 200 hives each.

Support for beekeepers comes from local associations, and from the Wales Bee Inspection Service, which is part of the National Bee Unit at the Central Science Laboratory in York. The Welsh Assembly Government funds the bee inspectors in Wales, and they provide an invaluable service.

Local Beekeeping Associations provide the beekeeper with essential training and support. All of the 19 local associations in Wales are affiliated to the Welsh Beekeepers' Association – Cymdeithas Gwenynwyr Cymru, which has about 1000 members.

DEFRA estimate that the annual value of honey produced in the UK is £10 - £30m. and the economic value of crops pollinated by honeybees is £120 - £200m. The honeybee is the main pollinator of many crops. The yield from oil seed rape pollinated by bees increases by about 10% and for top and soft fruits by about 20%. Large-scale beekeepers move their hives to the oil seed rape and the apple orchards in spring, then to fields of borage and finally to the heather in August. Commercial fruit growers will pay to hire hives of bees in the spring, when other insect pollinators are scarce.

The role of the honeybee in the environment is critical. Albert Einstein is reputed to have said that if honeybees were to become extinct overnight, mankind would cease to exist within four years!

For most beekeepers, working with the bees is just an enjoyable pastime, providing a small extra income. However, there is always a good demand for Welsh honey, which small-scale beekeepers cannot meet, and the bees can easily be built up into a useful sideline business. Bees don't need a lot of looking after. They are active only from April to October and they do not require much space. They produce a valuable and very saleable crop. They benefit the environment; and they will usually pay for their investment within a couple of years. Now that's good business!

CALU's leaflet on basic beekeeping is available on the website – www.calu.bangor.ac.uk

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