

Sweet Survival

The case of the Hong Kong 's vanishing bees

By Julian Ng & Tiffany Tsim





“The bees won’t sting humans out of the blue.”

- 1 / The beekeepers would clear the frame and slice off the dark brown wax time by time.
- 2 / The wax could then be used to make lip balm and ointment
- 3 / Yip Ki-hok is finding the queen on the frame, which is larger than other bees

Yip Ki-hok gingerly removes the plastic sheeting covering the top of a beehive and gently takes out the brown wooden frame to show Varsity the home of a full colony of honey bees - the queen, the drones and worker bees. The 60 year-old Yip started keeping bees when he was eight years-old and living in the Mainland. He came to Hong Kong in 1983 and built the Wing Wo Bee Farm in Sha Tin’s Pai Tau Tsuen in just three

months, making the wooden hives out of cast-off lumber.

So familiar and comfortable is Yip with the bees that he points out the structure of the hive using his bare hands, without wearing any protective clothing. “The bees won’t sting humans out of the blue,” he explains.

Wing Wo is a family business keeping bees and collecting, bottling and selling their honey. The bees collect pollen mainly from ivy trees grown on

the farm in December and lychee and longan trees nearby. In April. These two months are blossoming seasons when bees make honey. The quality and taste of their honey depends heavily on the species of flowering plants that they collect pollen from.

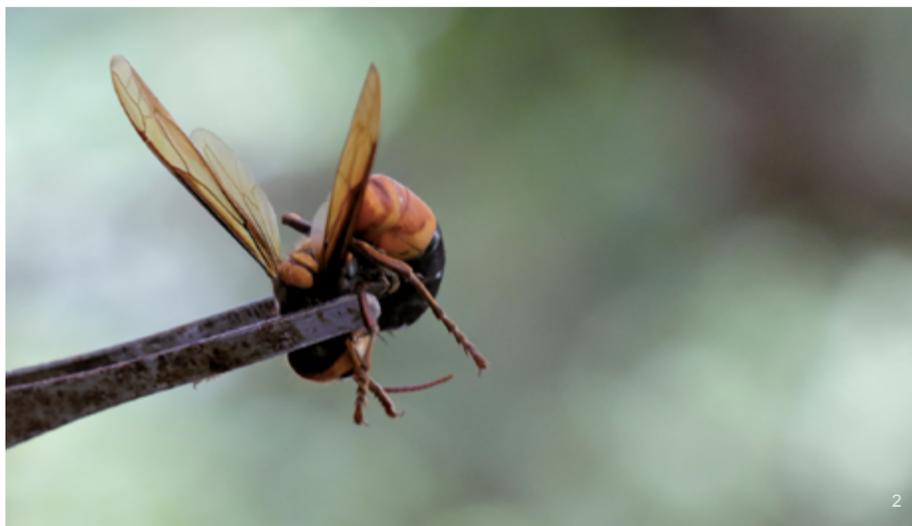
Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), where large numbers of worker bees abandon their colonies, is affecting the survival of bees worldwide. Large batches of bees have suddenly disap-



Lee Chun-hung



Yip Tsz-lam



1 / Hundreds of wasps would gather in the bee farm if the beekeeper ignore them
2 / Drones were safeguards who protected the colony from being attacked by wasps



peared or died in the USA and Europe but the phenomenon has not occurred in Hong Kong. However, Yip says it has become more difficult to keep bees in recent years. “I have to smack thousands of wasps with a racket in the past year,” Yip says. “Wasps kick the bees out of the hives and feed on the bee larvae.”

Yip says wasp populations have increased rapidly because of global warming. Warm weather encourages larger colonies of wasps that are attracted to the bees as a rich protein source for feeding their larvae. For beekeepers, wasps are enemy number one.

But wasps are not the sole threat. There is also climate change. “In summer, half the colony of bees fly

to the bottom of the hive because it is too hot inside,” says Yip. He explains bees would rather rest in their hives than pollinate during the hot summer months.

Another problem is the unstable weather which reduces the number of nectar sources. Heavy rain and frequent typhoons wash away tree pollen and grains. This forces beekeepers to give the bees supplemental sugar but this can make them rely on feeding instead of pollination in the long run – with disastrous results for the ecosystem and crops.

Some may think that a way to deal with the dropping bee population is to build more beehives, but sadly, this is not the case. Rather, “The key is whether the surrounding environment

can provide sufficient nectar sources to bees,” says Yip Tsz-lam, the Senior Sustainable Agriculture Officer in Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden. “If there aren’t enough nectar sources, it would be meaningless to just increase the number of bees.”

The role of forests and vegetation is of utmost importance to pollination. They provide wild spaces for plants. The nectar and pollen of many flowering plants are vital food sources to many pollinators like bees. “Without sufficient nectar sources, bees can barely survive. The ecosystem will thus be affected adversely,” Yip says.

Yip says beekeeping has become more challenging over the past 30 years, mainly because of the process





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of urbanization. Hong Kong is a city with a high density of population. In order to satisfy residents' housing needs, the government is developing more land in the countryside and cutting down trees.

“We lose the fruit trees one by one and they won't grow back,” Yip sighs. “In recent decades, no one plants fruit trees anymore.” Property developers have cut down hundreds of lychee trees in Ngau Tam Mei for urban development. The government has transformed swathes of countryside into new towns filled with high-rises, which starves bees of pollen and nectar and endangers their survival.

Despite the decline in fruit trees, Yip does see a glimmer of hope. “The proportion of native plants in some

areas, like Tai Mo Shan, is expanding,” Yip says, largely due to the proliferation of a genus of native plants called *Machilus*.

The future of Hong Kong's bees and countryside are uncertain, but Yip's bond with bees is not. He likes being around them and beekeeping is his passion. In his own way, he will be their guardian. “I will keep bees as long as I am living and capable of doing so,” he says. ■

Edited by Zoe So