

Where Did the Bees Go? New York City Beekeeping Amid Ecological Crises

Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut

The decline and extinction of bees and other pollinators threatens the global food supply. Residents in cities like New York have engaged in the practice of beekeeping to harvest honey and care for this essential species. Ethnographers Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut explore the connections to urban sustainability that this new practice entails.

Bees have always lived in metropolitan spaces without the aid of humans. Yet, until very recently, most people never thought of them as a species that would “naturally” be at home on the rooftop of a brownstone or a high-rise building. The recent interest in urban beekeeping signals a shift in the public imagination. A variety of urbanites, including established upper-class women, young hipsters, and families with young children, are beginning to welcome these critters, recognizing that the health of bee colonies is deeply enmeshed with the health of humans, urban ecologies and the biosphere.

Figure 1. Inspecting a new frame from a Langstroth box at Eagle Street Rooftop Farm in Greenpoint, Brooklyn



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On the brink of extinction: colony collapse disorder

Beginning around 2006, colony collapse disorder (CCD), an elusive syndrome responsible for the disappearance and death of honeybee colonies, was reported on extensively in the American media, stirring an eco-political buzz. While conducting fieldwork for our book *Buzz: Urban Beekeeping and the Power of the Bee* (Moore and Kosut 2013), people asked us, “What is happening to the bees?”, “Why are the bees dying?”, and “Where did the bees go?” Likewise, seasoned NYC metropolitan area beekeepers, who sell honey at local farmers’ markets or teach beekeeping, told us they were flooded with similar questions. Since publishing *Buzz* in 2013, attention to CCD has not waned and bees continue to be in peril. According to a major United Nations report from 2016, based on two years of global research, invertebrate pollinators like bees and butterflies are on a path to extinction (Ansari 2016). The plight of pollinators is attributed to a host of human stressors and interventions: industrial farming and monocropping, pesticide use (especially neonicotinoids), parasites, global warming, and habitat loss from urbanization.

Since honeybees have been a domesticated species trained for industrial food supply for centuries, if these managed pollinators were to go extinct, crop yields would dramatically decline. The heterogeneity of human diets would be drastically affected by honeybee extinction. And it is not overly dramatic to suggest that most humans and many non-human animals would experience massive food insecurity as well as famine. And yet the bees are still here despite the inhospitable conditions humans have created. Due to a revived interest in urban farming, locavore food movements, green consumerism, and a demand for gourmet boutique honey, bees occupy an increasingly visible role in the ecological and cultural life of American cities.

Figure 2. Requeening a hive and smoker



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Urban Beekeeping

Bees’ new status in the city was heralded in a *New York* magazine article covering “the everything guide to urban honey,” advising readers to “think of them as your new pets.” Since 2014, New Yorkers have celebrated an official Honey Week held across the city in the fall—eagerly attending beekeeping classes and apiary tours, tasting varieties of honey, and consuming all things

bee at an event called Honey Fest. Even though bees are a *cause célèbre* and labeled a trendy “pet”, beekeeping has not always been a welcomed practice in the city. Bees were considered a territorial invader and therefore human–bee relationships have also caused controversy within urban municipalities. The New York City Department of Health voted favorably towards lifting a decade-long ban on beekeeping in March of 2010. While beekeeping is now legal, it takes finesse and patience to establish a new colony in the city. Beekeepers must find an appropriate space for the hive and then notify human neighbors of their unusual insect neighbors.

In densely populated vertical cities like New York, backyards are a luxury (one that is often shared) and not all neighbors are keen at the prospect of inviting tens of thousands of bees into collective outdoor spaces. While some people are able to set up hives in their backyards (we met two who did so during three years of research), they are more commonly located in community urban gardens, apartment rooftops, or attached decks, wherever space and access allows. Beekeepers do not have to check their hives everyday, and they don’t have to commit to regular walks and feeding as is the case with nurturing dogs and cats. But they do need equipment (such as basic hive tools) and some kind of protective gear, which can take the form of a full beekeeping suit, a veil, hat and gloves, or some variation. Beekeeping styles and philosophies vary widely, often reflecting the personalities of the beekeeper. For example, we met people who practiced “backwards” beekeeping—a term they self-coined that refers to a preindustrial era before commercial beekeeping. The backwards philosophy is based on a hands-off approach to beekeeping, accepting that some bees will naturally die off, and is against using chemical agents to protect against mites and other invaders. Backwards beekeepers rarely suit up or even wear a veil, and we met one self-described anarchist beekeeper, Sam, who tended his bees barefoot. After idiosyncratic prepping and preparing, including gearing up to some degree, grabbing a smoker and a basic hive tool to pry open frames which bees seal shut with propolis (a kind of bee glue), people typically have to commute to the bees. For some, this can mean a 45-minute drive or subway ride, trudging up five flights of stairs, braving precarious metal fire-escape ladders and other inconvenient physical obstacles, all with equipment in tow. Throughout spring and summer, beekeepers visit their hives once a week or more, and while the process may become routinized, a hive check is more of an event, sometimes bordering on spectacle. It’s not like feeding a goldfish. When a box of bees is opened, everyone within a few feet of the din and frenetic movement takes a step back.

The work of beekeeping is dictated not only by landscape and availability but also by seasons. During the winter, the bees use survival strategies to make it through the cold when there are limited opportunities for pollination. Called “overwintering”, bees weather the chill by vibrating and beating their wings to create heat. The bee’s outdoor season begins in spring when the temperature is warm enough for them to emerge from their hives, typically a few consecutive days of about 60 degrees Fahrenheit (16 degrees Celsius) or above. For the beekeepers, the season begins months before spring arrives as people arrange to buy bees. Beekeepers obtain what is called a “package”: beekeeper terminology for three pounds of bees and a queen. The bees are installed into hive boxes and beekeepers then check the bees periodically to ensure that the queen is healthy and laying brood. But beyond the beekeepers’ vigilant eye, honeybees themselves know what is needed to make the hive work. They are “connected by the network of their shared environment” and “achieve an enviable harmony of labor without supervision” (Seeley 2010, p. 6). We work with and for bees, but they don’t necessarily require our assistance.

Figure 3. Bees on comb with brood



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A Model of Sustainability

Honeybees are social insects that live in colonies and maintain their survival through harvesting nectar and pollen from flowering plants and, in cities like New York, most especially tree blooms. As the city swarms with human activity, bees quietly pollinate fruit, vegetables, plants and wildflowers, playing an integral part in the local urban ecology. Flying from blossom to blossom, they enable pollination or fertilization and sexual reproduction of plants and trees. While some species of bees can survive as individuals, honeybees cannot. They must be part of a colony, what entomologist Thomas Seeley (2010, p. 327) describes as a “harmonious society, wherein tens of thousands of worker bees, through enlightened self-interest, cooperate to serve a (...) common good.” Urban beekeepers in New York do their best to nurture bee colonies, as they simultaneously negotiate a shared space with over nine million fellow humans and millions more non-human species.

In many ways, honeybee colonies are prototypes of sustainability and its members are experts in arcology—a form of design that merges architecture and ecology in structures made to accommodate densely populated areas. They design living spaces of hexagonal cells that are jam-packed and multi-purposed, being used continuously for reproduction and storing honey. They create all they need from their environments and grow their own homes by producing beeswax made from secretions from their abdomen. Praised for their efficiency and interdependency, honeybees are adept architects, and we do not rely on any other insect as much as the bee. As model insects, planners and architects continuously look to them as an example of how to produce and to prosper as a species, without draining or harming the planet’s ecosystems. As philosopher Freya

Mathews (2011, p. 50) writes, bees are integral to the planet's "inexhaustible regeneration of life" through pollination, one of the "great metabolic processes of the earth" in addition to photosynthesis and thermal and atmospheric regulation. Bees' economic and agricultural utility to humans is quite considerable. The annual value of honeybee pollination to US agriculture is estimated at over \$19 billion (Hansen 2015). And yet it is only since they have gone missing that bees tangibly appear to us.

Our everyday life as city dwellers involves heterogeneous interactions with non-human animals. Even though we tend to view the urban environment as an exclusively peopled place, animals are everywhere. In the wake of CCD and green initiatives, people are especially starting to notice bees and other pollinators so integral to the local urban ecology. Through establishing hives, beekeepers create more meaningful and sustainable urban places. Some people have been changed by the presence of bees. They get attached through time spent laboring over them, especially in spring and summer when bees are most active, getting to know the "personalities" of the hives, or just hanging around with them. When the work of beekeeping is over, some people linger around these insects rather than rushing off to their human worlds. Eric, a seasoned city beekeeper told us: "When we are done we will just have a beer and just watch them... We will put them back together and have a sandwich and it's very cool to watch. They shoot out of that landing board, starting out at 15 miles an hour—like an aircraft carrier. The neighbors will come over to our hives and watch them. It's this fascinating nature thing." Bees give people pause and hives can become a site of sociality and interspecies connection. As Christine, a beekeeper from Red Hook, Brooklyn, told us, a hive has a certain energy over humans: "When my grandson was young, we would bring him near the hive and it would have a relaxing, calming effect and he would stop crying, like that." She paused; "There is something in the air about them." From a sociological perspective, place is not simply about space—areas defined by technical, territorial, and bounded terms.

Sociologist Christopher Mele (2000, p. 13) asserts that "place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations." Place is made meaningful over time because it is embodied, lived in. Its inhabitants give a community a sense of place, and, in our fieldwork, urban places were made meaningful in part through the presence of unlikely insect neighbors. Echoing geographer Jennifer Wolch (2002, p. 722), we bring the bee into the urban landscape for intellectual, ecological and moral reasons, "to re-imagine the *anima urbis*—the breath, life, soul and spirit of the city—as embodied in its animal life." In the wake of the global pollinator crises, urban beekeepers hope to create a more ecologically sustainable place for us all.

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Lisa Jean Moore is a medical sociologist and Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at Purchase College, State University of New York (SUNY). She lives in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Her books include *Buzz: Urban Beekeeping and the Power of the Bee* (New York University Press, 2013, with Mary Kosut), *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2010, with Judith Lorber), *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility* (New York University Press, 2009, with Monica Casper), and *Sperm Counts: Overcome by Man's Most Precious Fluid* (New York University Press, 2008), and the edited collection *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Readings* (New York University Press, 2010, with Mary Kosut). Her newest collaboration with Monica Casper is *The Body: Social and Cultural Dissections* (Routledge, 2014). Her most recent scholarship investigates the intraspecies relationships between humans and *Limulus polyphemus* (Atlantic horseshoe crabs).

Mary Kosut is a cultural sociologist and Associate Professor of Sociology and Media, Society and the Arts at Purchase College, State University of New York (SUNY). Her recent work looks at New York City art worlds and how alternative art economies exist within the hyper-gentrified city. She is a curator and co-founder of GCA, an exhibition space in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

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