

Improving Lives in Sierra Leone

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Focussing on honey production, bee and beekeeper health and their well-being, Bees Abroad is sponsoring a project in the Chiefdom of Barri in Sierra Leone. The benefits of changing from honey hunting to Kenyan top bar hive management are being felt by the locals.



Drawing of a rock painting made in 6,000 BC. Cueva de la Arana, near Valencia, Spain, by Achillea, courtesy of Wikimedia Creative Commons licence.

Working as Bees Abroad volunteers, we have established a beekeeping project in the Barri Chiefdom of Sierra Leone, a rural area of secondary forest and bush on the fringes of the Gola Rainforest. We were struck by the parallels with ancient beekeeping and how the people of Sierra Leone have learned from the lessons of history in terms of both healthcare and developing their local economy by embracing modern beekeeping practices.

For over 8,000 years, there has been a multifaceted relationship between bees and people. The cave painting in Cueva de la Arana near Valencia in Spain, dated from around 6,000BC, shows a human figure ascending a rope ladder to collect honey from a cliff face. It is thought to be the first evidence of 'honey hunting' as it is still practised in many communities today. The people we work with in Sierra Leone would recognise, and relate to, the Stone Age honey hunter, as this was the way in which villagers collected honey before we arrived.

Rainforest habitat under threat

Sierra Leone's Gola Rainforest is tropical and wild bees are still prevalent. However, it is now under threat from habitat destruction due to the 'slash and burn' method of farming, where a new site is cleared for farming every few years as the land becomes infertile.

Changing the local mindset

We introduced Kenyan top bar hives, which are beneficial to well-being at many different levels. For bees, the relationship is an improvement over honey hunting as the colony survives and is even given some protection from other predators. The honey hunters we worked with could see the difference between descending on a home, burning the inhabitants and taking all the stores, versus entering through the back door, emptying the store cupboard and leaving the family sleeping. We like to think that the bees might also prefer the latter!

Preserving and increasing the bee population of an area benefits the wild plants of the area and increases the yield of the people's crops. For the communities that Bees Abroad is in partnership with, the prime benefit is the money that honey, propolis, wax and the products made from wax brings them.

The honey taken from a hive is much cleaner than that gathered from a wild nest, which tends to be full of dead bees and burnt matter. The wax products that have been most successful in the communities we work with are ointments and creams made simply by combining wax with oil. Our base oil has been sunflower, but creams made with added neem oil, to repel mosquitos, have been very popular. Similarly, lip balms flavoured with peppermint oil sell well; the possibilities are endless. This money may be the only income the household has and can make the difference between adequate food or malnutrition during the 'hungry season', the two-to-three-month period when food reserves are exhausted before the new harvest.



Filling pots with cream. Unless otherwise stated, all photos are by Neil Brent.

The income from selling bee-related products is not the only financial contribution to the improved well-being of the community. The villages we are in partnership with are only just emerging from the effects of prolonged civil war (1990–2001) and an Ebola epidemic (2014–15). Virtually everyone is a subsistence farmer in addition to any other roles they may hold within the village. There is very little cash circulating within the community and few ways to earn it. Beekeepers need hives. Since we started work in Taninahun three years ago, there is now a trained carpenter cutting planks from locally felled timber, the local blacksmith now makes hive tools as well as machetes and the tailor is an expert in making bee suits. Once the Bee Farming Association is fully up and running, we are hopeful that they will be able to employ people to process and pack the honey as well as sell it in the market and further afield.



A hive made from bamboo being 'mudded' to seal it.

Cash earnings empower women as well as men

A little cash circulating within a community makes a big difference. Money earned by a co-operative women's farm by selling vegetables enabled them to set up a loan scheme for members, employ men to help them clear more land and even, due to their enhanced status in the community, provide a forum for discussion and resolution of domestic disagreements. The song says 'money makes the world go round' and, in this case, it can certainly help to regenerate an economic community. Women are active participants in our beekeeping training, so we hope that, before too long, the income from bees will help to improve their position and options within the community.

Not all honey is sold; some is consumed providing a useful sweetener and source of energy. It is a high-status gift often used in ceremonies and can be converted into alcohol.

Unlike in some other African countries, Sierra Leone has no tradition of using honey as a dressing for wounds or burns and the dirty honey from a wild hive would certainly not be suitable. We



Squeezing comb to extract honey.

have discussed using the clean honey from top bar hives in these situations with the local district medical officer who is interested in setting up a trial. Unsurprisingly, there are no local facilities for irradiating honey to sterilise it as would be done in the UK. Some of the studies from India have good results with non-irradiated honey. Bees Abroad volunteers have reported that hospitals in Uganda use honey for wound dressings to good effect.

Humans have interacted with honey bees and used their products in many ways over thousands of years. The introduction of beekeeping to communities in Sierra Leone is empowering them in many ways and enabling a mixed economy to develop. Bees contribute to the health and well-being of humans, plant life and the planet. Our lives are intricately connected with this small insect and long may that continue.

Further information

This year Bees Abroad is celebrating its 21st anniversary. This project is one of forty currently managed by Bees Abroad volunteer partnership managers. Each project works with the poorest communities worldwide, enabling them to produce and sell honey to buy medicines, pay school fees and buy household essentials. To find out more visit www.beesabroad.org.uk or email info@beesabroad.org.uk



Extracting honey by sieving.