

## The Forgotten Species

Today, when one talk about the environment, the first thing that comes to mind is Climate Change and the air we breathe. Sometimes, the tiny parts to this engine is not considered or perhaps not even known. We know for sure that trees form a vital part of the lungs of this planet and the fight is on to keep the little that is left of this lung before we lose it completely. But trees give seeds to form new trees and so the cycle continues.

In order to ensure the dissemination of the seeds, trees need to have their blossoms pollinated and there are many agents that do so – gravity, wind, birds, insects and so on. This paper is particularly concerned with bees. Trees need bees to help fertilize the seeds that dispersed and give new trees to ensure that we breathe and maybe even halt the ravages of Climate Change. Of all the agents of pollination, the bee is the most efficient and faithful to the blossoms it visits. Organization and cooperation are the guiding principles within a hive, so even if a new source is found, while some stay to finish off the work, the others go on to serve the other source.

In Guyana, not many people are into beekeeping and the sight of a ‘just land’ swarm on a fence or an established one in a mango tree creates so much fear. People know two things of bees – they produce honey and they sting to death. They are dangerous.

The craft of harnessing and husbandry of bees is called Apiculture. Quite a few organizations and individuals have tried to install this in some hinterland communities as a rural sustainable livelihood activity. Though I agree that this is a wonderful way to assist especially rural people to an alternative livelihood, I disagree for bees to be taken from the coastland to the interior to develop an industry. Many projects have failed soon after funding stops and the facilitators go away. Why? Many factors can be responsible. Thought is never given to the other pollinating populations and the competition it might create as they feed in the same pasture. Many a time these projects are imposed on the people. As that request did not come from them, so, the love for the insects is not there. Determination to work with them is absent. We cannot run away from the fact that the fear is great among people and they will withdraw if that reassuring figure is not present.

However all is not lost, before the advent of *apis melifera* - Italian bees or Africanized bees (AHB), there was always a luscious greenery, with fruits, flowers, insects, animals and people – Columbus’ discovery! There were pollinators!!!. Though they went unnoticed, indigenous (stingless) bees were among the them. There are many types and they store their honey differently. They might not give the quantity of honey like the Africanized bees per year, but according to research their honey is very medicinal and even more research is being done to determine the extent of their usefulness. The art of the harnessing and husbandry of these bees is called meliponiculture. Where the AHB cannot reach these creatures have been doing a wonderful job ever since creation and we in Guyana have been ignoring its presence or rather many are ignorant of their existence. Besides me, I only know of one

other beekeeper who have tried to harness and husband these insects. The truth is that we are not sure of a local name for these species. We recognize that they are stingless bees by their method of feeding and the way they store their honey and the reaction to the defense of the colony. For those who are afraid of stings and the AHB, then, this would be a good option if people are taught the HOW-to capture and to care. These bees nest in old tree trunks where some hollow exists or in the earth or in old ants etc.

While clearing land for farming, housing, mining, irreparable damage has been done and continues to be done to their habitat and their lives. Loggers, woodcutters and coalminers have seen and destroyed these nests as they engage in their trade without recognizing their value.

There is no entity in Guyana that monitors the movement of insects. For some time now we have noticed the occurrence of the presence of some stingless bees on the coast and urban areas in unusual numbers. IS IT THAT THEY ARE LOSING THEIR HABITAT AND MOVING NORHWARD? Research needs to be carried out to know what there is before we lose all that we have. And most of all, people can be taught how to rationally husband them. This then, can become a sustainable alternative livelihood activity for rural and forest people, and petty loggers.

Guyana has one of the world's lowest rate of deforestation and the government has pledged to keep our forest intact. Also, Guyana has implemented the Low Carbon Development Strategy whereby the country receives payment for its forest service that makes the forest worth more alive than dead. It also encourages investment in high potential low carbon sectors in everything else but bee culture. Yet, at the same time logging and mining concessions are being given to foreign companies and people. Land is being cleared for housing in a massive housing drive. But since there is lack of knowledge of the indigenous bees, the fear is that more habitats and bees will be lost and those who come to extract will do just that - extract - as there are no laws protecting the insects that may inhabit mature trees.

It is somewhat compelling now, the time has come for people to become more aware that stingless bees do exist. I do try to disseminate the fact but I cannot do it alone. Guyana has an abundance of races. What is needed first of all, is research and then development and dissemination (awareness) of the usefulness of these insects. If only the knowhow can be taught and people get into meliponiculture, I can foresee a little cottage industry developing in its own right, while, at the same time enhancing the environment and saving and preserving a very useful species 'THE FORGOTTEN SPECIES.'

Thank you

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