

H O R I Z O N S

# Hives of activity

*Bushfires are set to have a massive impact on commercial honey production, making hobby beekeepers essential to the future of the industry.*

STORY JILL GRIFFITHS



JANET PATERSON



FAIRFAXPHOTOS

*Beekeeper Peter McDonald brings bees to Harcourt apple orchard in Victoria to help pollinate the 10,000 apple trees. OPPOSITE: A red-flowering gum provides nectar for foraging bees.*

Peter McDonald tried not to be a beekeeper. His father got into beekeeping in the 1950s, before Peter was born, and his mother came from a line of beekeepers, but Peter joined the army. After 10 years, he came back and worked in the hives for a year, but left again, this time going to university, initially to study computing and then to work. Eight years later, he came back to beekeeping.

"I've been working in the hives for 15 years now, and I'll do it for as long as I can," Peter, 51, says. "I like working outside in the natural environment. I like working in an office, too, but I like being outside more. It just took me a long time to realise that."

These days Peter is steeped in honey. He works in the family business McDonald Honey, with his wife Michelle, their daughter's partner Matthew, and two other full-time staff. "We also have a casual employee who has been invaluable over this busy season," Peter says. He describes the good season beekeepers are having in his corner of Victoria as a guilty pleasure – a pleasure because reaping large quantities of honey is always a pleasure. The guilt comes from knowing that many of his fellow beekeepers are doing it tough this year.

"The fires will have a massive impact on the honey industry," Peter says. "There's some good beekeeping country in the Queensland and NSW coastal areas, into Victoria and SA that has been burnt out. There will be a lot of hive losses. We can't quantify how high those losses will be for a number of months. But the big impact will be the loss of the floral resources that we rely on. That could go on for 5–10 or more years. Some eucalypts that are heavily scorched may take

12–15 years to flower again. In areas where the eucalypts don't re-sprout, but rather need to rely on seed to germinate and grow, it may be 20 years until there is a good flowering season."

Along with his work in the family's commercial enterprise, which sells bulk honey that is branded Castlemaine Honey, Peter is Chair of the Australian Honey Bee Industry Council (AHBIC). The AHBIC is a peak representative body for the honey industry, which in Australia comprises more than 1780 commercial beekeepers, plus a plethora of amateurs. Bee hives are required to be registered with agricultural departments and there are more than 25,000 registered beekeepers throughout Australia. Annual honey production in Australia is around 25,000 tonnes, with a market value around \$90 million.

Commercial beekeepers are defined as those with more than 50 hives and who sell at least 1500kg of honey a year. At that volume, beekeepers are required to pay a Federal Government levy of 4.6c/kg that goes towards funding research and biosecurity efforts. But Peter says the hobbyists are also essential to the Australian honey industry.

WA honey producer Rob McKrill agrees. Rob runs a commercial honey-production business and also sells beekeeping supplies, so hobbyists are an important part of his business structure. But there's more to his enthusiasm for amateur beekeepers. "Problems and disease are likely to hit hobbyists first," Rob says. "And if they approach the ag department or someone, we will have a chance to eradicate it."

The biggest potential disease facing the Australian honey industry is varroa mite, a tiny parasite that infects bees



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*Worker bees forage in a garden of poppies.*

and can devastate colonies. To date, Australia is the only country in the world that is free of varroa mite.

“Varroa has been detected here twice,” Peter says. The first of these incursions was in Townsville, in 2016, when a swarm of bees came in carrying varroa mite. “It took us six months to eradicate those bees and another three years to convince the rest of the world we had eradicated it.

“Then in 2018 some varroa arrived in Melbourne, but we jumped on that one very quickly. It’s no fault of anyone’s really that it will come in – there’ll be a beehive under a container or something like that. But we have very good surveillance and monitoring. The hobbyists are an asset to us in this way. They help with monitoring and watching their hives.”

It isn’t just the lack of disease, and the consequent absence of chemicals used to control it, that makes Australian honey sought after. Australian honey tastes good.

“Seventy to 80 percent of Australian honey comes from eucalypts,” Peter says. “And eucalypt honeys are good. They are highly prized. Moisture is a key criterion in honey – it has to be below 21% moisture to be classified as honey. Australian honey, especially eucalypt honey, is typically low in moisture. It’s thick and dense, with a very pleasant taste.”

Australian honey is often sold in bulk overseas, and then blended. But there is an increase in sales of packaged honey of specific floral types. Research that has quantified beneficial probiotic and antibiotic benefits has helped push specific Australian honeys into international markets (issue 124, p82).

While the most common pathway into the honey industry is the one Peter took – following a family tradition – the other major entry point is the one Rob took: getting a job with a commercial beekeeper. Others begin as hobbyists and become professional beekeepers later.

“Hobby beekeepers mostly get into it because of the bees or because they want pollinators,” Rob says. “But they soon start learning that they are fascinating little creatures.”

When people come into Rob’s shop to buy equipment

when they are starting out, he gives them a word of warning. “I tell them to run away now before they get hooked,” Rob laughs. “Once you get involved, it’s very hard to get uninvolved.

“You may buy \$500 worth of equipment – most people spend \$2000–\$3000 though – but it will last you for 30 years. How much you spend depends on how often you want to replace your gear. The cost of good gear is negligible over the lifetime of its work.

“You end up selling more product than equipment you bought. You only need 2sq m for a hive. Beekeeping is a common sense hobby. If you have common sense, you can be a beekeeper. It’s not rocket science.”

Rob says that for their efforts, the hobbyist beekeeper may get 50–100kg of honey from a hive. Commercial operators generally get much more than that. “Commercial beekeepers will travel bees around to follow flowers,” Rob says. “It’s economies of scale. It’s their volumes. They will have good sites, and they can work with lots of sites so that they have one that is working at any time.”

Peter says he sees quite a lot of people come into beekeeping from highly stressful jobs, finding peace in doing so. “When you go into a hive and work on bees, you have to concentrate on what you are doing,” Peter says. “It’s very mindful. It’s very relaxing. Everything else has to go out of your head.

“We run loads of about 170 hives on our trucks and you go and work on the bees on that truck and every hive is different. It’s a bit of a challenge – in one way, beekeeping is simple: find the flowers, take the bees there, let them get honey, take the honey off the bees. But in other ways it’s not simple – you need to read the bees, read the trees, read the climate.”

Surprisingly, Peter says the stings are an important part of it. “If bee stings didn’t happen, and they didn’t hurt, then everyone would have beehives,” he says.

