

Brownington Beekeepers aim to educate

by Eleanor Lowen | Community News Service

Northeast Kingdom residents may have heard about pollinator decline. There are new threats that can seriously hurt bees, such as Varroa destructor mites and pesticides. However, farmed honeybees are not in any danger of going extinct, thanks in part to the efforts of beekeeping associations like the Brownington Beekeepers.

Beekeeping associations play a big role in teaching aspiring beekeepers how to cope with the new challenges of beekeeping.

“The main mission would be mentoring new beekeepers and the sharing of new research and practices for established beekeepers,” Garret Thibault, who currently runs the Brownington Beekeepers, said.

“One of the biggest issues is the Varroa mite,” Brooke Decker, pollinator health specialist and state apiculturist with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets, said. Varroa mites are an invasive species from Asia.

“The Varroa mite transmits viruses to the honeybee just like ticks transmit diseases, pathogens to humans,” she said.

Thibault agrees that Varroa mites are a serious issue. He said there were two main problems. First, the mites “are a vector for disease,” and second, “as they’re feeding off the bees they’re reducing their immune system.” They can kill large percentages of a hive, especially if left untreated.

Still, with proper management, threats such as Varroa destructor mites can be handled, and bee populations can thrive.

“Honeybees are facing huge issues, but because they’re a managed population, the actual numbers of colonies in the country is on the rise,” Ms. Decker said. “They’re like livestock, because humans take care of them and can make sure they survive despite Varroa destructor mites and other issues. They’re far from being extinct or



A bee at work in Newport.

Photo by Joseph Gresser

something like that. They’re not going to disappear off the face of the planet.”

Mr. Thibault agrees.

“We’re not going to lose bees,” he said. “That wasn’t ever a question, that we’re going to lose bees, because you can grow bees extremely fast.”

Even though honeybees are not in danger of going extinct, concerned citizens might still want to help them. However, Ms. Decker warns that there are right and wrong ways to try to help the bees.

“People want to help save the bees by getting a beehive and then they’ll leave it in the backyard and not manage it well,” said Ms. Decker. This is a problem, because “if you’re not keeping healthy honeybees, your neighbor might get a disease from your bees.”

Ms. Decker has some ideas of how people can actually help the bees.

“The best thing to do if you want to help save the bees actually would be to buy honey from a

local beekeeper,” she said. “Another great way to help the bees is to plant flowers.”

The Brownington Beekeepers work to increase awareness about the role and health of honeybees in the region. They organize school field trips to the Old Stone House, and make pollinator-friendly seeds available for free through the Barton library, according to Cindy Delano, who founded the club.

Ms. Decker is not sure how much the issues harming honeybees are also harming native, wild bees. She said honeybee health might be able to indicate how well wild bees are doing.

“It might be a stretch, but it could be like the canary in the coal mine type thing,” she said.

There are over 400 native bee species in Vermont, so there are likely some differences in how different species of native bees react to different stressors. Bumblebees can catch honeybee diseases, but it is not clear what effect those diseases have on them.

“I don’t think there’s been a lot of studies that actually show a negative effect on the bumblebees,” said Ms. Decker.

Both Mr. Thibault and Ms. Delano expressed a deep interest in bees.

“These are really interesting animals. They have quite a complex social structure,” Mr. Thibault said. “They communicate where floral sources have high nectar value or high pollen value. They’ll do a dance.”

“I’m awed at the organization of the colonies, the colonization, the building of community that bees do,” Ms. Delano said. She said it was love of bees that led her to start the club, and a community of her own.

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