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Urban Beekeeping: Opportunities and Risks

A European study has sought to assess the current state of urban beekeeping, examining both its positive aspects and its potential negative impacts.

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Urban beekeeping is becoming an increasingly widespread activity in many cities around the world. But what are the opportunities and risks associated with this form of beekeeping?



An urban beekeeper in Washington D.C. (Photo by USDA - Wikipedia)

A study conducted by European researchers has sought to provide an overview of the situation, publishing its findings in People and Nature, the scientific journal published by the British Ecological Society.

In recent years, the number of beehives in cities has increased significantly. For example, in Berlin, the number of hives rose from fewer than 2,500 in 2005 to more than 7,500 in 2022. In Toronto, the number increased from 230 in 2013 to over 3,000 in 2020. For other cities, precise data are lacking, but urban beekeeping is often on the rise.

There are many different types of urban beekeepers, including hobbyists, enthusiasts, researchers, associations and professional beekeepers. There are also many positive reasons for keeping bees in cities, such as promoting environmental education, conducting scientific research and monitoring, organising social activities, selling honey and other bee products, and also protecting bees by providing them with an environment that is often less stressful than certain rural areas. This may be due to lower pesticide exposure and the availability of floral resources that remain relatively consistent throughout the year.

However, there are also less noble reasons for placing beehives in cities, such as beewashing, a practice adopted by many companies seeking to create an image of environmental sustainability simply by installing a few beehives on their rooftops.

Beyond these positive aspects, urban beekeeping can also pose problems for bees themselves and for the urban environment. As the authors point out, and as other studies have also observed, cities are becoming increasingly interesting ecological systems for many wild plant and animal species, including pollinators. Urban environments offer specific ecological niches that cannot be found in natural habitats and which can be highly attractive to various species.

With regard to bees, a study conducted in Spain found that 30% of the species present in urban parks are now characteristic of urban environments. According to another study carrie out by Brazilian researchers, 1,900 bee species belonging to the families Apidae, Halictidae, Megachilidae, Andrenidae, Colletidae and Melittidae (listed in descending order of abundance) are found in cities around the world.



A top-bar hive used for educational aims on a roof in Milwaukee, USA (Photo by Bradley James - Wikipedia)

An excessive number of beehives in cities could therefore become a problem, both for other pollinators and for honey bees themselves. Indeed, food resources in cities are generally scarcer than in natural environments, even though they are often available more consistently throughout the year. This can lead to both interspecific competition (between honey bees and other bee species) and intraspecific competition (among honey bees themselves).

Another ecological risk is the spread of bee parasites and diseases, as well as the potential spillover of these threats between different species.

Finally, another major issue associated with urban beekeeping is the frequent lack of data and information, both regarding the number of beehives present and the types of beekeeping practices being carried out.

According to the authors of the study published in People and Nature, regulating urban beekeeping would be an extremely important tool, both for protecting bees (honey bees and wild bees alike) and for ensuring that beekeeping activities deliver genuine social and environmental benefits.

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