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Rethinking the Buzz about Bees

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Until recently I thought all bees were alike. They live in colonies or hives, pollinate flowers to produce seed for the next generation, make honey and sting when threatened. With the advent of honey bee colony collapse disorder (CCD), all the buzz about bees has been focused on saving the bees – honey bees that is.

The truth is that all bees are not alike. And the honey bee is not the ‘be-all’ of bees. In fact the honey bee is only one species of more than 20,000 bee species in the world. In the early 1600s honey bees were brought by European settlers to the United States where nearly 4000 native bee species have always called North America home. Most native bees are solitary and ground nesting. Surprisingly most native bees do not make honey, are 2 to 3 times better pollinators than the honey bee and are much more plentiful than previously thought. Most importantly they are not prone to the highly publicized CCD that has decimated honey bee populations.

Researchers now believe the focus on saving the honey bee – based largely on economic concerns – has overshadowed the need to be equally concerned with incredible losses in native bee populations. Almost 50 percent of native bee species have disappeared in some areas of the Midwest in the past 100 years. Of nearly 50 species of bumble bees in the U.S., four species have declined as much as 96 percent in some areas in the past 20 years and several are possibly extinct. A species found in Iowa, the rusty-patched bumble bee, is currently on the endangered species list.

Why does this matter? According to the USDA, approximately 75 percent of the world’s flowering plants and about 35 percent of the world’s food crops depend on animal pollinators to reproduce. Most of these pollinators are beneficial insects such as bees, wasps, ants, butterflies and moths. It is estimated that bees account for approximately \$19 billion worth of crop production in the U.S. each year.

The fact is honey bee colonies supplement the work of natural wild pollinators – not the other way around. Native bees have co-evolved with native plants to form critical interdependent relationships. Together they help pollinate and maintain the diverse plant communities we depend upon for food production. In a lot of crops, specialist native bee pollinators do a much better job than generalist honey bee pollinators. For example, native bees improve fruit production in apples and create twice as much blueberry fruit. Squash bees pollinate our cucumber and squash family of vegetables. Native bees do 90 percent of watermelon pollination. Tomatoes are best pollinated by bumble bees. The list goes on.

So maybe we have been overly concerned about the wrong bees. After many years of intense research about CCD and honey bees, we know a lot about what kills them. We know much less about what is happening to our native bee population. Fortunately, educators and scientists have begun to advocate for more research about native bee populations and work together for the protection and restoration of habitats for all bees. The media is starting to give native bees a greater share of the buzz about bees by creating awareness and support for these equally important pollinators. It's about time. The food supply of our nation and the world might well depend on it. You can help protect and support our native bees. Go to the Xerces Society website <https://xerces.org> to find guides for creating pollinator habitat and native bee nests.

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