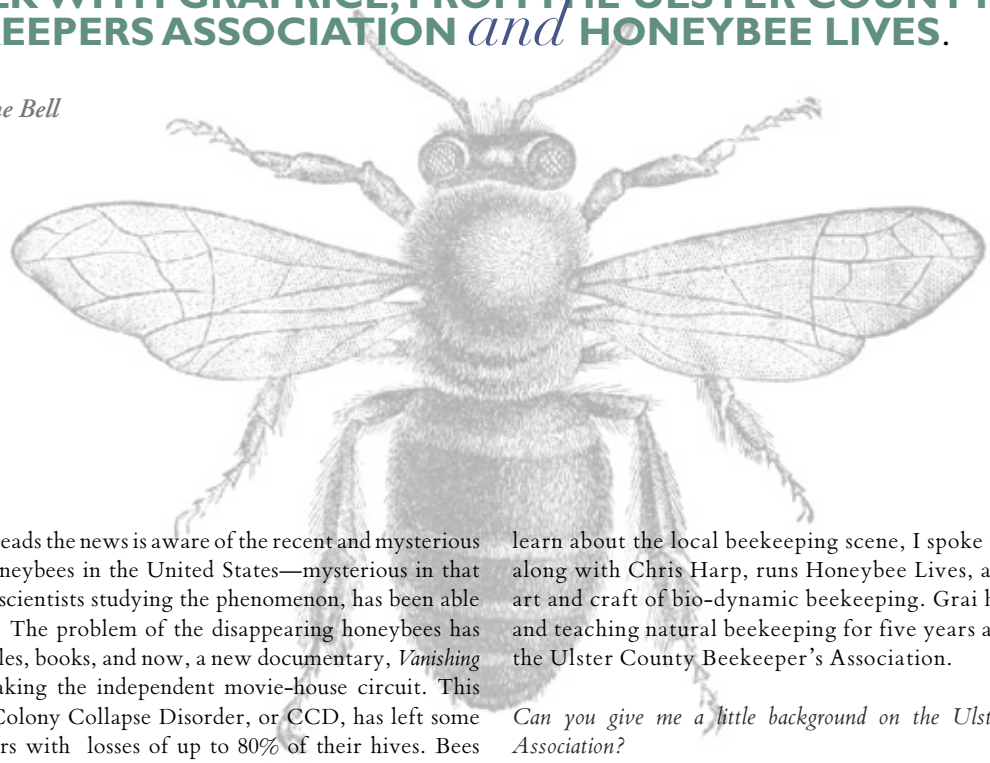
WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

will natural backyard beekeeping save the HONEYBEES?

A TALK WITH GRAI RICE, FROM THE ULSTER COUNTY BEEKEEPERS ASSOCIATION *and* HONEYBEE LIVES.

By Jamaine Bell



By now, anyone who reads the news is aware of the recent and mysterious widespread loss of honeybees in the United States—mysterious in that no one, including the scientists studying the phenomenon, has been able to pinpoint the cause. The problem of the disappearing honeybees has been explored in articles, books, and now, a new documentary, *Vanishing of the Bees*, that is making the independent movie-house circuit. This phenomenon, called Colony Collapse Disorder, or CCD, has left some commercial beekeepers with losses of up to 80% of their hives. Bees were already under stress dealing with the varroa mite, an Asian import that has also taken a tremendous toll on the bee population. With the stressful management practices that bees in commercial hives undergo, which include applications of pesticides in the hives to kill the mites, a weakened natural resource, this time our bees, has once again been brought to the point of collapse.

How important are bees to our lives? Consider this: one out of every three mouthfuls of food is attributed to the pollination of the crops by the bees. Without bees, we would have to eliminate most fruits and vegetables from our diet. In an agriculturally rich area in an agricultural state, bees have an important part to play in our local and state economy as well. In other words, without bees, we're in big trouble.

All is not completely grim, however, in the bee queendom. Natural backyard beekeepers are not experiencing CCD or the losses that commercial beekeepers have been enduring. I wanted to explore how local backyard beekeepers are faring in the Hudson Valley, and to learn about the differences in backyard beekeeping versus commercial beekeeping, and how the natural approach to what should be a natural endeavor—agriculture—is inevitably the right thing. To learn about the local beekeeping scene, I spoke with Grai Rice, who, along with Chris Harp, runs Honeybee Lives, a local resource in the art and craft of bio-dynamic beekeeping. Grai has been keeping bees and teaching natural beekeeping for five years and is also the chair of the Ulster County Beekeeper's Association.

Can you give me a little background on the Ulster County Beekeeper's Association?

Chris Harp and I have been teaching beekeeping together for five years. He's been a beekeeper for about 22 years. More and more people were becoming backyard beekeepers, both before, and especially after, the media blitz about Colony Collapse Disorder. But even before CCD, people were starting to say we should get together and have a club.

Our group is based on natural beekeeping. We teach natural organic beekeeping with the bio-dynamic edge to it. Our goal was to create educated, nurturing beekeepers, and that's kind of what we want the bee club to be as well. People are now coming from Dutchess and Columbia Counties, from all over the place—Sullivan, Orange—because there is no other group like ours. The state apiarist, who was the state inspector for our region for a couple of years, came to Chris and me and said, "Between your Honeybee Lives and the Ulster County Beekeepers Association, your area is now on the map—you have 12% of the bees in this state," which I find incredible.

How do you feel the State of New York has been affected by CCD and the mites?

CCD is a term used because they don't know what it is or they're not willing to admit what it is. The mites have been around for about 24

years or so, and that's a big problem. Bees have an exoskeletal system, so when a mite bites, the exoskeletal system of the honeybee doesn't heal and other viruses can go in. So it's not actually the mite itself that kills the bee, but it allows other diseases to enter.

That is a problem, but one of the most devastating things, which we are all still trying to deal with, is how the commercial beekeeping industry has responded to the mites. They put pesticides in their own hives. Well, that sucks. That is causing residue pesticides in every piece of commercial wax in this country, because it never leaves the wax. And these things have been proved to impact the reproductive systems of the queens and the drones. So, all around it's screwing us up. Honeybees are basically out in the world, dealing with environmental factors. They are in a migratory realm. They are in a mono-crop environment and they are dealing with pesticides and herbicides in that environment, which impacts their immune system. We're never going to get rid of the mites; we have to figure out a way to get the bees to be able to deal with them.

Do you know how the state of New York is doing with that—is it a big problem up here, because we are an agricultural state?

We are an agricultural state. Because we have so many orchards, we have a lot of migratory beekeepers who bring different pests and diseases in. The migratory beekeepers have moved weakened bees and unhealthy hives into orchards in our area.

One thing I can say: we feel that beekeepers have not been supported for our role in trying to keep honeybees healthy. The State of New York has pretty much disbanded its apiary program. If you don't have honeybees, you don't have the agricultural environment. The State doesn't help support and educate and ensure that there aren't outbreaks brought in by the migratory beekeepers who come in and dump their hives for three weeks, get paid a lot of money, and then leave.

CCD hasn't really affected small beekeepers. What has affected small beekeepers is the continued loss of forage in our area as more houses are built. Also, because we are in this area where there are orchards, our hives can be impacted by the sprays in the orchards around us. So as far as CCD is concerned—I've heard people say, "I lost my hive to CCD." Well, not likely. CCD is a very specific scenario that affects the migratory beekeepers.

PHOTOS OF GRAI RICE BY MATT PETRICONE

Is it just orchards, or do you know of other crops that use a lot of pesticides?

It's really hard to find seeds that don't have a systemic pesticide that they have been soaked in. If a seed is soaked in a neo-nicontinoid pesticide, then it's throughout the plant. There is concern that these pesticides would cause the honeybees to forget to go back to the hive. Could be… don't know. During CCD, did they leave and not make it back because of neo-nicotinoids, or did they go off and die and not come back? In a way, when you are dealing with orchards in our area, it's tricky. If owners don't spray at a certain time, they may lose their crop.

Is pesticide use in New York a big problem, do you think?

I do think it's a big problem. It's a big problem everywhere. People aren't aware, even in home environments. There are really toxic chemicals people use in their home environments and on their yards that are the same as the commercial chemicals. It's a matter of the public being educated.

The American Pollinator Protection Campaign has a pesticide task force, which due to infighting over labeling, has made no progress in two years. Some of them wanted to make the labels clearer about the hazards, but then the people who sold those things or used them didn't want to raise an alarm or have liability. So they decided to educate the applicators and to work on the protocols in how you educate the applicators. But then you get an instance like this spring, where someone is spraying the orchards but the applicators haven't been trained and don't know what they're spraying, and you have to call the DEC to go check out what is involved. It becomes very complicated. There's no transparency in what we are using, both in our home products and what's being used out in our agricultural environment.

How is backyard beekeeping different from commercial beekeeping? What does an organic farmer do as opposed to a commercial farmer? How do you think those differences affect the health of the bees?

One of the biggest differences is that small beekeepers don't think of honeybees as part of an agricultural machine. There's more of a spiritual side to it, and a love. Honeybees in a commercial environment are there because the beekeepers want the pollination money and farmers that hire those beekeepers want their crops pollinated. It's really good money to be a pollinator. If you have 1,500 hives, you can't be nurturing them. You're throwing them on pallets and on the backs of 18-wheeler trucks and you're taking them places that are not healthy, and you're sticking Apistan in the hives to deal with the mites and feeding them high fructose corn syrup when they're in the almond blossoms. You've never heard of almond honey, because there is no almond nectar. Two thirds of all the commercial bees in America go to the almond bloom. They are fed HFCS because there is no honey to feed on.

Those of us who are smaller beekeepers are not putting our bees in that kind of environment. I think our practices in backyard beekeeping are more nurturing and, for the most part, the people in our bee club are not putting chemicals in their hives. If you have a few hives in your back yard, you take the time, you go out and look at them with a cup of coffee in the morning, and you contemplate their well-being, and you get to watch them on the flowers. It's a completely different way of approaching them. Someone said that beekeeping was farming for intellectuals. In a way, it is farming, because you are dealing with pollination, but it's not like pulling weeds—it's something else.

One out of every three mouthfuls of food is attributed to the pollination of crops by bees

Some of the commercial beekeepers are realizing that part of what could be a factor in CCD is management practices. So I do believe there are commercial beekeepers in the Hudson Valley who are changing their practices. Some are not. But I think we're blessed in the Hudson Valley because there are so many progressive thinkers who are interested in helping the environment.