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Be(e)ing Human: The Socio-Historical Dimensions of Collapsing Beehives

Over the course of the twentieth century, multiple agricultural crops and ecosystems in the US have come to depend heavily on managed honey bees for pollination. The continued viability of these crops and ecosystems is threatened today by a phenomenon of honey bee die-offs known as “colony collapse disorder” or CCD. Scientists agree that CCD is the result of a complex combination of multiple factors, including pesticides, parasites, pathogens, and poor nutrition, but over half-a-decade since reports of CCD first emerged considerable uncertainty and controversy remain over which (sets of) factors are more prominent. A better understanding of the plight of honey bees requires a re-framing that analyzes not just “the” honey bee, but human-bee relationships in a historically, socially, and politically sensitive fashion. Doing so recognizes that honey bees are nature-culture hybrids whose very be(e)ing embodies historically influenced technologies of beekeeping and bee biology. My preliminary analysis suggests that we need a deeper historical sense of the interactive development of bee biology and beekeeping in order to arrive at a better understanding of the circumstances that led to CCD. My proposed research will analyze accounts of interactions between entomologists, bee scientists, and beekeepers and the notions of bee health and expertise that emerged from these interactions. Sources will include writings in beekeeping/farming trade periodicals and newsletters, speeches at meetings, and written accounts of meetings between researchers and beekeepers. An in-depth social history of honey bee experimental life stands to inspire justly sustainable research for resolving the environmental problem of collapsing beehive that we currently confront. It will also shed light on how the interplay between (animal) technologies, experimental practices, cultural norms, and institutional contexts shape the historical trajectory of environmental knowledge.