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## To bee or not to bee

BRIONY PENN

Rex Welland was an advocate and protector of native bees. In light of his recent passing—and of the many threats to bees—others must take up the challenge.

For many children today, bees are simply the generic honey bee that appears on the Honey Nut Cheerio box providing further evidence of the indomitable power of corporate logos. This honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) is the introduced, domesticated species brought over in 1662 by European colonists to pollinate their crops.

But when it comes to pollination, there are over 3300 species of native bees in North America who are also up to the job. There are 30 species of wild bees in Victoria alone, but they aren't found in hives or manicured gardens. They are found in wild, messy places like clumps of long grass, thickets of salal and salmonberries, dead trees, decaying logs, banks of earth, riversides and old railway corridors.

The wild bees fall mostly into five main tribes: Bombini, the gregarious colonizing bumble bees of which there are two main species, distinguished by the colours of their bums; the Mason Bee tribe, most notably the Blue (or Orchard) Mason bee (*Osmia lignaria*), the gentle solitary little blue-back bee that is becoming quite a celebrated addition to households by the manufacture of mason bee homes; the Andrena tribe or mining bees that burrow in tunnels in the ground often in colonies; the Ceratina tribe, small carpenter bees that excavate galleries in the piths of stems like huckleberries and salmonberries; and the Halictid tribe which are tiny little dark metallic green bees that are very fast but are attracted by sweat and might hover near you as you pant in the heat.

Up until now, few people gave much thought to our native bees because we had the uber species *Apis mellifera* at our beck and call, busily pollinating as well as providing us lavishly with honey. There are no native honey bees in North America. The western honey bee was carted around the world from its origins in Africa and we put all our pollination hopes in one hive.

But now the honey bees are in rapid decline around the world because of the acceleration of mite infestations, new viruses, pesticide use, climate change and other not well-understood factors leading to a lethal cocktail called Colony Collapse Disorder. It's a classic case of an unstable monoculture. This year, 35



A member of the Bombini tribe at work

percent of the honey bee colonies have collapsed in North America—another disastrous year, including western hives, which had not suffered such high losses to date.

Enter: our native bees and those who have been trying to raise awareness of them and their habitat.

Rex Welland, an orchardist in Saanich and a specialist in heritage apples, started noticing 25 years ago that his apples weren't being pollinated adequately. Typically apples produce 10 to 20 seeds depending on the variety so when seed numbers drop he knew he had to work on finding alternatives to the imported honey bees whose population had already started to fluctuate from mite infestations. He read in a magazine about attracting the native blue orchard bee by drilling holes in a block of wood so he tried it. "The first year, a couple of holes were filled by bee cocoons and after that I just kept getting more and more interested in what was going on. I had a new sideline!"

Rex came to be known locally on Vancouver Island as the bee man as well as the apple man. He perfected the means of attracting seven or more native species of bees. Instead of drilling holes in wood, he developed slotted trays, which enabled him to strip them each year of

“WHAT WE ARE DOING NOW is causing the native bees problems through urbanization, cultivation, irrigation, clear-cut logging and everything else.”

—Rex Welland

the cocoons and avoid infestations of a different type of mite. Each species of bee have different times of emerging and specific requirements in their habitat. In his peak period, he was building slotted trays to accommodate up to 250 holes being filled by bees a day.

Welland was a familiar figure at fall fairs and other community events with his slotted trays filled with cocoons showing people how anyone can make habitat for their native bees. Traditionally we had lots of dead and dying trees drilled by woodpeckers for these bees or long grass for the bumblebees. Said Rex, “What we are doing now is causing the native bees problems through urbanization, cultivation, irrigation, clear-cut logging and everything else.” One of the biggest killers of bees is the lawn.

Welland also developed a list of all the plants that the orchard bees love, at the top of which is camas—the indigenous lily and staple carbohydrate for the Saanich First Nations. Gardeners, like Welland, noticing declining pollinators, have now become some of the best advocates for the native bees, creating and leaving native habitat in their backyards.

Welland died on June 25 after a lengthy illness. This spring, in an interview, he shared his vision for the future. “We have to start getting into the schools and talking to the youngsters. All they learn about is honey bees. But of the 20,000 species in the world; there are only seven that are honey bees; 19,993 we know nothing about. What an opportunity for kids to get involved!”



Briony Penn PhD is an award-winning environmental educator; the author of *A Year on the Wild Side*, and a candidate if Saanich—the Gulf Islands in the next federal election.

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