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Between fascination and doubt

Motives, attitudes and dilemmas of contemporary beekeeping practices from an ethnographic perspective and proposal for a community supported beekeeping concept

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English summary

In recent years, the honeybee has become a focus of public attention. Stylized in the socio-political discourse as an indicator of the health of the world, it has thus become the likeable ›postergirl‹ of the insects threatened by environmental degradation. Countless newspaper articles on the topic of honeybee decline have been published in recent years, often in connection with the question of whether the bees' death would also deprive humans of their livelihood. In this discourse, however, a central point seemed to receive comparatively little attention: Currently it must be assumed that there is a beekeeping person behind almost every honeybee that floats on our meadows, gardens and balconies. If there is a beekeeper involved in all these bee colonies, shouldn't we know more about these people? What different motivations do they have for beekeeping and what problems do they face? What is their attitude towards their bees and how is it reflected in beekeepers' different solution strategies?

The starting point for answering all these questions is the assumption that there are always certain attitudes embedded in the different ways of beekeeping. These include different perspectives people have about bees in particular, their attitudes towards ›nature‹ in total and their own standards on how to deal with them are central to the constitution of contemporary beekeeping. These attitudes are reflected in beekeeping practices, they are inscribed in tools, beehives and even bees' bodies. They also force beekeepers to make difficult decisions and they motivate them to develop diverse solution strategies. These basic attitudes, from a more ›guidance and control oriented‹ to a more ›tolerant bee-centered‹ attitude, motivate beekeepers to apply a certain school of beekeeping practice and to categorically reject others. Examining the

different views and practices, however, it is noticeable that they have one thing in common: no solution seems to be right or wrong. Regardless of whether deep interventions and control measures are aimed at the bee colonies, or whether unobtrusive beekeeping is preferred, they all have understandable and convincing, but also controversial components. Beekeepers have to decide.

To bring together the numerous, interacting components that affect the world of beekeeping, I have divided this book into three sections: The first part deals with my own learning and socialization process as cultural anthropologist in beekeeping. The focus here lies on understanding experience-based knowledge and applied beekeeping skills. Through the examples of a spring review of a beehive, and joint beekeeping in Malta, the interaction of different components involved, and the complexity of experience-based knowledge are shown. It becomes clear why technology and alienation from the running processes in beekeeping could not be fully implemented due to the complex interwoven processes in a beehive. The use of senses, in combination with experience, remains irreplaceable in beekeeping. The fourth chapter is a transition to the second section of the book. It deals with the historical development of the currently largely close ties of the European branch of the Western honeybee to beekeeping interventions. Central to its development was the historical development of a guidance and control-oriented attitude towards the bee colonies, which can be seen in the paternal character of the ›Bienenvater‹ (›bee father‹) and which is still inscribed in practices such as problem resolution through bee breeding. Based on this historical view, I work out the resulting contemporary dilemmas and predicaments of beekeeping, which are often based on the situation that beekeepers can no longer, or do not want to, watch their bees suffering or even dying. They feel a responsibility towards them. Examples from research-stays in small and large apiaries, together with bee scientists and in the agricultural industry illustrate the development of these dilemmas in practice. In the third and last part of this book, I discuss the different response strategies to the current dilemmas of beekeeping. In order to be able to classify their diversity, I span a field between a more ›guidance and control oriented‹

and a ›tolerant bee-centered attitude‹ towards beekeeping. This field subsequently enables practical solution strategies within beekeeping to be classified into an ›tolerant bee-centered solution strategy‹ through natural selection, into an ›guidance and control oriented interim solution‹ by keeping bees alive through interventions, and into an ›actively control-oriented solution strategy‹ through bee breeding and selection.

The aim of this book is not only to bring together different perspectives and attitudes in beekeeping, but also to join the discussion. If the first two parts of this book deal with the question: »How did the contemporary problems of beekeeping develop?«, then the third part asks the question: »Which future do we want for beekeeping?« The conceptual design *Solid.Imk.*, a model for ›community supported beekeeping‹ represents an applied proposal. This model, built up and tested in two beekeeping-seasons, is based on the ideas of community supported agriculture (CSA). It attempts to bring together the demands of honeybees and other insects in their habitats and the needs of beekeepers and society as well.