

Desperate times require desperate measures.

As I write this in May of 2017 we are at a point in the beekeeping world where things are not working very well. We have tried so many ways to “fix” our beekeeping systems that we are now up against a brick wall. Most people just keep saying the same old things over and over again. They get very defensive when you question why they do the same things that fail year after year. They also ridicule those that don’t agree with them and adopt their failing techniques. This is unfortunate because it prevents real progress from being made because closed minds are not going to find solutions that work for the long term.

After reading the most recent edition of my beekeeping magazine, I have come to several conclusions which lead to one basic idea: The most prevalent ideas out there in the beekeeping world are working against each other, which pretty much insure failure. Here is one example: A prominent bee researcher admits that frames of brood with wall to wall brood are what he and other producers want, but just create a great environment for varroa to feed on. He is not willing to step back from this and select for bees that produce a brood pattern that fills a deep frame with a nice oval pattern of brood ringed by pollen and honey. I think each frame in a hive is a micro picture of the health of the hive. If each frame has all it needs for life – good brood pattern and adequate stores, then the hive as a whole is healthy and can survive with or without much intervention from the beekeeper. Healthy hives can resist varroa. Ah, but that is the catch, isn’t it? This researcher wants to select for bees that will resist varroa or kill it or some other terminology that is just playing with words. In reality, he wants his cake and eat it, too, and that doesn’t work in the natural world.

The second example comes from the U.S. honey report. It says that although we have more bees in the U.S. than we have had in past years, the total honey production is down. How can that be? Doesn’t more bees equal more honey? Again, if we are just selecting for wall to wall brood, where is there room for honey? The bees are selected to make lots of bees. Just like laying hens have had the instinct to brood chicks bred out of them, bees are having the need to store for a winter that never comes bred out of them. Lots of brood, lots of food for parasites, no stores to keep bees healthy. Silly me, I just don’t understand commercial agriculture. They can’t stop doing all this or they will go out of business. I say if they don’t change their way of doing things they will put themselves out of business.

Nature has a limit on how large any population becomes before it will collapse. Isn’t that an interesting word? Where have I heard it before? Well, I digress, don’t I? Several years ago we had a problem in our area with an overpopulation of gypsy moths. They defoliated trees and shrubs and were a scourge on the world. However in a short period of time, less than four years, they experienced a natural collapse and returned to a balanced position in our local environment. We still have gypsy moths, but they are not causing catastrophic damage. Nature found a balance in due time.

Commercial agriculture attempts to expand production without any eye to an upward limit. Bigger is better, no profit can be made unless things are kept at a gigantic scale. Unfortunately this requires many unnatural inputs to maintain. After a while nature works to restore a balance which is more realistic to maintain and the system begins to fail. This requires more inputs, different inputs, to keep up the level of production. Agriculture becomes a fight against nature, not working with it. Agricultural products are just that, products, not growing, living things.

This year I am engaging in my most desperate experiment yet. It certainly looks completely foolish to most “experts” in the beekeeping world. By early May, all I had left of my bees was one lonely,

queenless hive. Yes, you could say I am not a very successful beekeeper, either. After all, I went into winter with six hives. Oh, it must have been varroa! Of course it was, it couldn't have been anything else because nothing else causes beehives to fail in 2017. Unfortunately I found no mites. None at all. Oh, I am sure I just didn't look properly. They certainly were there and not only did they kill my hives they must have infected everyone else's in a 20 state area around me because I never treated for varroa in my beekeeping career. One prominent beekeeper suggested to a fellow beekeeper that if she didn't find varroa in her dead hive it was because they had left because the bees died. Hmm. I have seen hives killed by varroa, and there are always mites in the debris on the bottom board. Come on, if the mites killed the bees, they will still be there as evidence.

Well, my sarcasm certainly shows that I don't believe my hives died from varroa. I have thought this through and read through my management notes and decided that my bees died because of weak queens. I have been raising my own queens for several years and this year's batch did not survive a whole year. I attribute that to poor genetics in the general gene pool available to my virgin queens. I like Carniolan queens and try to start my hives with them, but all my daughter queens were Italians. This tells me the drone population doesn't include many Carniolans. The Italians have a lot of weak traits in my area which do not fit with my beekeeping philosophy, part of which is hives that can survive at least one winter!

So this year I purchased new Carniolan queens to put with splits and build up the Carniolan population. Unfortunately by the time my queens arrived, my last queen had died. She had survived (barely) two winters. I guess that was all the further she could go. She left behind enough bees to split off four ways and make four new hives with mated queens.

So, in mid-May I began what amounted to small packages – a few broodless bees and a mated queen in four different hives. It's pretty risky, but really I have no other choice. I am not going to get packages from Africanized regions with puppy mill queens that just roll out the same weak, varroa susceptible bees everyone else has. These queens came from Hawaii, which does not have any Africanized bees, at least yet! At least my queenless hive had pretty docile bees. They seem to have accepted the queens. They had only made a couple very pathetic attempts at making some queen cells and didn't have any evidence of laying workers when I split them to make the new hives, so I guess that is good.

I believe this will be an interesting experiment, and should it succeed, will show that the real beekeeping world is not the one being represented in the beekeeping literature and at most bee meetings and conferences. I really don't mind being regarded as a kook by the general beekeeping establishment, I just feel sorry for beekeepers, especially new beekeepers who have nothing but their sure to fail advice to follow. I have a small following of people who are trying these new (really very old) ideas in defiance of the beekeeping community. We are having a really good time together. We have found that beekeeping can be fun and extremely interesting. It doesn't have to be a depressing, losing battle. Why would anyone want to do something that is like that?