

Story: Beekeeping

(1839)

(Gillingham, A., 2008)

Page 1. First bees and early beekeeping

Value of bees in New Zealand

Bees are prized for their honey – New Zealanders each eat about 1.5 kilograms of it per year, which is high by world standards.

While gathering nectar to make honey, bees carry pollen grains from one flower to another and pollinate fruit-bearing plants – essential in the production of agricultural and horticultural crops. The value of bees to these industries is many times greater than the revenue earned by honey.

Sweet preservative

Bees have been making honey for about 10–20 million years. The ancient Egyptians used honey to embalm their dead, and Alexander the Great was buried in white honey.

The need for bees

In *My bee book* (1842), the Reverend William Cotton concluded that bees should be introduced to New Zealand to 'confer on the natives of New Zealand the pleasure and profits of bees of their own.'¹ It was later recognised that bees were essential for pollinating the white clover being sown in pastures with seed from England. The clover grew well, but could not reseed without a pollinator.

Introduction of bees

Mary Bumby, the sister of a Northland missionary, was probably the first to introduce bees to New Zealand. She took two hives with her from England aboard the *James*, in March 1839, to the Mangungu Mission Station in Hokianga Harbour. Bees were also brought by the Reverend Richard Taylor, William Cotton, Lady Hobson and James Busby in 1843. The introduction of bees to the Bay of Islands is attributed to Bishop Pompallier.

Becoming established

The New Zealand bush proved a hospitable place for bees, and the number of wild colonies multiplied rapidly, especially in the Bay of Islands. Isaac Hopkins, regarded as the father of beekeeping in New Zealand, observed that by the 1860s bee nests in the bush were plentiful, and considerable quantities of honey were being sold by Māori – who were the country's first commercial beekeepers.

In 1848 Cotton wrote *A manual for New Zealand beekeepers*, which described the basics of bee husbandry and the production of honey and associated products.

Early beekeeping

The commercial production of honey in New Zealand began only after the introduction of the Langstroth hive in 1851. After the First World War, beekeeping rapidly became more popular as land was developed and returned servicemen

Best size for a hive

The Langstroth hive was named after the American inventor L. L. Langstroth, an

American, and described in his 1871 book, *The hive and the honey bee*. He was not the first to use the hanging frames, but did discover that bees failed to build a honeycomb in a space of less than 6.3 millimetres or greater than 9.5 millimetres. If the space was smaller, bees filled the gap with propolis; if the gap was larger they would not use it.

were trained as beekeepers. Motorised transport made the spread of hives across the countryside easier, and made beekeeping more economic.

There were about 100,000 hives in New Zealand by the end of the 1920s. Beekeeping flourished again after the Second World War, and in 1950 there were some 7,000 beekeepers with 150,000 hives. By 1988 there were 335,000 hives, partly due to the demand for pollination services, and also because of the market for a broader range of honey types and products.

Footnotes:

1. William C. Cotton, *My bee book*. London: Rivington, 1842, p. 357. >

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