Harvesting Honey from a Log Hive

İrfan Kandemir, Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, Ankara University, 06100 Tandoğan, Ankara, Turkey

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In August 2008 I joined the Beekeepers Safari organised by Bioteymatur and Bees for Development to explore beekeeping experiences in different regions of Turkey with participants from many countries. During the Safari we witnessed unique management techniques by local people, and I would like to share just one of these very special honey harvesting methods which has a long tradition in the Black Sea Region of Turkey.

Turkish beekeepers use a variety of hives such as simple box hives, log hives, skep hives and frame hives. Honey harvest is a great ceremony for the beekeeper: ‘the happiest day in a beekeeper’s calender’! Harvesting honey from log hives is especially interesting, and when the hives are in a tree, harvesting can be dangerous and requires co-operation between friends. It is difficult to remove honey from these hives without damaging or destroying the bee colony: the bees can become upset and the result is of course that the beekeeper is stung.

Clever designs

Beekeepers use clever designs that discourage queens from laying eggs in some parts of the hive so that honey can be harvested without damaging the brood nest. Beekeepers know that queens have a tendency to lay eggs in only one area of the nest, and this area moves progressively. Also the direction of combs in the horizontal log hive is important for beekeepers (Figures 3 & 4).

Combs built across the hive (perpendicular to the entrance) can be easily harvested in one piece, usually from the rear of the hive, leaving the remainder for the colony for the winter. However combs built along a horizontal log hive would definitely be broken during harvesting and the beekeeper would have to cut long combs containing some brood.

In the Black Sea Region the direction of the comb is determined by the beekeepers: they put a small starter comb in an empty horizontal log hive to establish the comb direction. As you see in Figure 3, the direction is not exactly perpendicular to the entrance, nor along the log hive as in Figure 4, but in between the two. The beekeepers explained that the new direction makes the comb easier to harvest, with less damage to the brood and the colony.

How do beekeepers harvest honey?

Five pieces of equipment are used during harvesting. Two of these are known by every beekeeper: the hive tool and the smoker. Two are knives, to detach the comb from the log hive: one is locally called Aldemir or Elseren (a flat bladed scraper), and the other one to cut the comb to separate the honey and brood part is a Hadiç (one-ended cutter). The fifth piece of equipment the Korza or Heçel, looks like a big wooden spoon (Figure 5).

Figure 2. After opening the rear end of the hive, smoke is used to drive the bees

Figure 3. The direction of the combs lets beekeepers see inside

Figure 4. Combs built along the horizontal log hive

Figure 5. Two type of knives and wooden spoon to cut and hold the honeycomb
The harvesting procedure is in three parts:

1. Drive the bees out of the hive – this means smoking after opening the rear door of the log hive (Figures 2, 6-9). The beekeeper smoked the hive for a long time and finally the bees (Figure 9) were all outside the entrance. Figure 8 shows the combs free of bees and ready to be cut out.

2. The beekeeper starts to sever the connection of the comb to the ceiling of the log hive with the flat bladed scraper (Figure 10). The wood frame inside the log hive (Figures 7; 11 & 12) is the line that the beekeeper should not cross. Beekeepers harvest all the combs up to the wooden stick whose place is predetermined while making the hive.

3. After detaching the upper comb connections, the beekeeper uses the one-ended cutter to cut the honey portion of the comb up to the wooden stick or from the area where there is no brood. No matter how careful the beekeeper, there may still be damage to the colony (Figures 11 & 12).

Why log hive beekeeping?
Beekeepers continue this method of beekeeping because it is traditional, however the significant factor is the selling price of comb honey from the log hives. Strained honey from frame hives sells at about US$15 (€10) per kg, and comb honey obtained from frame hives without foundation is US$30-35 (€20-24). However, comb honey from log hives is much more valuable and can sometimes sell for over US$100 (€70) per kg.

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* Phil Cunningham, 2008 Turkey Safari participant

Figure 6. Smoking the hive to drive the bees out

Figure 7. The bees leave the colony after heavy smoking

Figure 8. Honeycombs ready for harvest

Figure 9. The bees are all in front of the log hive after heavy smoking
Figure 10. The beekeeper starts detaching the combs

Figure 11. The difficulty of harvesting (note the cut brood)

Figure 12. Cut honeycomb . .

Figure 13. ...delicious and ready to serve