Collective beekeeping to combat pollinator decline

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“Together, let us start beekeeping”, participants decided at a meeting of ‘Parna’ the Western Ghats Farmer Producer Company, operating in the tropical forests of the Western Ghats in India. Parna was formed to promote sustainable production methods through collective marketing of crops, forest products and bringing in responsible collection practices for forest resources.

The meeting was organised to discuss the possibility of value addition to Non-Timber Forest Products, prioritising the species for value chains, sustainable harvesting and species augmentation. Participants decided to recruit local expert beekeepers to carry out the harvesting, processing and collective marketing.

Within 15 days of the decision, the total number of hives reached 100, 53 had been sited and the remainder would be placed after the monsoon. To date 38 kg of honey have been harvested and sold.

Collective beekeeping objectives

- To conserve the honey bees which are important pollinators across a wide area
- Sustainable rural development
- To empower women, forest dependent and indigenous communities through improved processing, value addition and marketing.

Investing Partners are encouraged to pay Parna INR4,500 (US$66; €57) for a bee hive, honey bee colony and stand. In turn, Parna will repay 1.5 kg of honey or the equivalent in money to the investor annually up to six years. Share members can keep their hives in a suitable place. However, the Company decides on the place for the hives invested by people from other towns and villages. Both are maintained and monitored by trained people. Areas which are free from chemical pesticides, away from highways and in forest regions with flora for pollen and nectar have been selected. The Indian Foundation for Humanistic Development in Bangalore has provided technical and financial support for this venture.

Encouraging development

“Initial trends and development are encouraging. There is a team spirit and enthusiasm in the bee collective. There is regularity in monitoring the hives. We hope we could scale up to a profitable business, meet the demand and compete in the market”, says Manjunath, Director of Parna, and Partner in the collective beekeeping.

Ramakrishna Jummanakanu said: “It would not be so easy to manage the colonies if we do it individually. Since we are engaged in other farming activities, regular monitoring was not possible. The same situation persists with most of the farmers in this part of the Western Ghats. Now the collective beekeeping has addressed many such challenges, we are happy to have such a programme”.

Beekeeping training

- Improved harvesting: eco-friendly packaging, labelling and collective marketing
- A portion of the profit will be used for forest conservation including species augmentation of bee flora
- Training honey hunters on sustainable harvesting practices and hygiene during processing.

Expected outcomes

- Improved honey-based livelihood opportunities
- Community led sustainable management of honey bees
- Increased levels of understanding of different issues relating to honey bees from biological, economical, policy and social viewpoints.

"The honey is truly most special. We gave honey as gifts on my birthday and everyone gave positive feedback, including doctors, the manager of a five-star hotel, friends and family. The honey is great – the right packaging helps the product to enter the market and claim its place as a premium honey”, says Chris Pohl, marketing specialist for an international company.

Global climate change, deforestation and forest degradation, extensive use of chemicals in agriculture and shortage of food are causing pollinator decline. This is a new initiative with a great hope.

Training underway for members of Parna, the Western Ghats Farmer Producer Company