

Beekeepers Work Hard For The Honey

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Van Morrison sang about it, Peter Fonda starred in a movie about it, and people from all over the world will pay top dollar just to get some of it. It's tupelo honey, a honey so distinct, light and smooth that people describe it as they would a fine wine. But the future of tupelo honey production may not be so sweet.

Florida State University geography Professor J. Anthony Stallins and doctoral student Kelly Watson are studying factors that could affect the future of beekeeping operations in Northwest Florida - one of the only places in the world where tupelo honey is produced commercially.

Watson has a \$15,000 grant from the U.S. Community Forestry Fellowship for Dissertation Research to work with beekeepers and study the tupelo forests surrounding Wewahitchka, Fla. "Wewa," as the locals say, is a small town adjoining the Apalachicola and Chipola rivers and serves as the unofficial capital of tupelo honey.

"We're hoping to paint a comprehensive picture of the challenges that face the beekeepers," Stallins said. "I don't think the public knows how hard it is to produce honey. We want more awareness of the social context of beekeeping and how environmental change and sociopolitical and economic factors play out to influence the use and access to tupelo forest."

Some beekeepers say that every year they seem to be getting less honey for their efforts. Stallins and Watson will explore the degree to which changing river hydrology, exotic pests, land development and other

factors are affecting tupelo honey production, an important regional industry that contributes about \$2.4 million a year to Florida's economy.

The researchers' findings will allow beekeepers to develop collective strategies to defend their livelihood, Watson said. That's important because helping the beekeepers will in turn help the survival of the forests along the Apalachicola River floodplain, one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in North America.

Although tupelo trees can be found elsewhere, the white tupelo from which the honey featured in the 1997 movie "Ulee's Gold" is derived is found in abundance only along the Apalachicola.

"It's the preferred tree for making tupelo honey," Stallins said, explaining that this type of honey does not granulate like many honeys. "The tupelo honey derived from forests with a greater concentration of white tupelo is more likely to have the complex floral flavor when compared to other tupelo honeys."

It takes a colony of 60,000 bees about 2 million nectar-gathering visits to the tupelo blossoms each spring to make a pound of honey. That task is even tougher than it sounds because some beekeepers say it is increasingly difficult to find places to put their hives.

One reason is because the forest has taken a beating from more than 45 years of dredging of the Apalachicola for a river navigation project. The dumping of the dredged material has cut off many tupelo trees from their source of fresh water. Upstream water diversion also has lessened the flooding needed for a healthy tupelo forest.

Exotic pests are taking their toll, and beekeepers throughout Florida are losing between 30 percent and 50 percent of their bee colonies to mite and beetle infestations.

But the challenges facing beekeepers in Wewahitchka are as much political and economic as they are ecological, and it's the inclusion of those factors - zoning regulations, land development, higher property taxes and increased cost of living - that makes this study significant, Stallins said.

Watson, who abandoned her dissertation on fair-trade labeling of coffee in Mexico in order to focus on what she believes is an urgent need closer to home, said her interest in the issues surrounding honey production began after one Wewahitchka beekeeper told her, "Before long tupelo honey may be a thing of the past."

Indeed, many beekeeper hobbyists have abandoned the pastime and commercial producers will only harvest honey as long as it is feasible in terms of economics, time and labor, Watson said. That's a shame, she said, because beekeeping is more than just a vocation in Wewahitchka, where it has been practiced by generations. It's a way of life that gives this rural community its unique flavor.

"It's part of our identity," Watson said. "It's something special to Florida."

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