

Life is sweet for beekeepers in Greece, but for how long?

April 21 2013, by Isabel Malsang



A bee is feeding from a wild flower on April 2, 2013. While many countries are struggling with high bee mortality, that's one global crisis that so far has yet to touch debt-plagued Greece. Greek beekeepers are still able to keep their activities at a safe distance from commercial farming, and therefore away from pesticides.

The rosemary season has ended, but sage is in full bloom. In the fragrant hills of the Peloponnese in southern Greece, after a few sharp turns along a path, Nikos Reppas' old car arrives at bee heaven: a field full of

violet hyacinths, close to the prehistoric ruins of Mycenae.

Since antiquity, when according to [Greek mythology](#) the god of love Eros dipped his arrows into honey before shooting them, the golden liquid has been flowing in abundance in this country, free of genetic modification and gleaned from vast, uncultivated lands.

And whereas other countries are struggling with high bee mortality, that's one [global crisis](#) that has yet to touch debt-plagued Greece.

"[Colony collapse disorder](#) is a problem in the United States and some European countries like Germany and Spain... We don't have this problem in Greece yet," says Paschalis Harizanis, professor at the Agricultural University of Athens.

The reason is that Greek [beekeepers](#) are still able to keep their activities at a safe distance from commercial farming, and therefore away from pesticides.

"Greek honey owes its unique aroma and taste to the fact that the better part of Greece is home to forests and wild ecosystems with only 29.32 percent of the land allocated to farming," says the federation of Greek beekeepers' associations (OMSE)

But this could change.



Thyme honey jars on the shelves of beekeeper Nikos Reppas' shop on April 2, 2013 in Nayplion, some 180 kilometers south of Athens. While many countries are struggling with high bee mortality, that's one global crisis that has yet to touch debt-plagued Greece. Greek beekeepers are still able to keep their activities at a safe distance from commercial farming, and therefore away from pesticides.

In March, Greece voted in Brussels against a ban on pesticides considered harmful to bees and apiculture.

The Commission wants the insecticides banned for use on four major crops—maize (corn), rape seed, sunflowers and cotton—in a bid to prevent a disastrous collapse in the [bee population](#).

Experts have isolated three compounds causing concern—clothianidin, imidacloprid and thiamethoxam, known as [neonicotinoids](#)—which are present in insecticides produced by pharmaceutical giants Bayer,

Syngenta and Cruiser OSR.

But, with 13 votes in favour and nine against, the ban was not adopted, while a new vote could be scheduled before the summer.

"The Greek vote...was a major disappointment to us and we fail to understand it," the OMSE federation said.

"Not banning the pesticides does not help agriculture. It does not help biodiversity, it does not help humans and insects. No one benefits from bees dying," adds Elena Danali, of Greenpeace Greece.



A tourist leaves a honey store on April 2, 2013 in Nayplion, some 180 kilometers south of Athens. While many countries are struggling with high bee mortality, that's one global crisis that has yet to touch debt-plagued Greece. Greek beekeepers are still able to keep their activities at a safe distance from commercial farming, and therefore away from pesticides.

For 46-year-old Nikos Reppas, a beekeeper in Nafplio whose family has been in the apiculture business for 200 years, life is dictated by flowers.

"In February we have the rosemary flowers, then in March come the sage flowers. Then those of oranges, pollen, the flowers of thyme in June, those of chestnut and oak trees in July, heather in September and carob in October."

This country of around 11 million has 20,000 registered beekeepers, out of whom over 1,500 make their living from beekeeping, according to Harizanis.

The country produces between 12,000 and 17,000 tons of honey per year, which makes it the second-largest honey producer in Europe after Spain.

But there is still a long way to go for Greece in terms of world exports, something the indebted country is desperately in need of.

Despite its striking honey production, Greece last year actually imported more honey than it exported (2,000 tons versus 800 tons).

Instead of selling to others, Greeks prefer to keep their sweet stuff close to home.

According to Harizanis, Greeks are the top consumers of [honey](#) in the world, with an average consumption of 1.7 kg per person compared to 0.4 kg in the United States.

"I love this. There is no other way you can do this profession, if you don't love it," says Reppas.

"My father is 77 years old going on 78 and still works professionally. A

beekeeper is for life. You are born and you die as a beekeeper."

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