

Sun-Sentinel

Dear Editor,

I am a PhD entomologist and do research at the University of Florida's Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center. In addition, I own Shalom Pest Control, Inc. in Boca Raton. I work almost exclusively with the insect Order Hymenoptera, which includes ants and bees. I would like to reply to an article written by Ms. Cara Campbell 28March2007 who says that we must be "humane" with any feral bee nest that we find in our urban environment. She wants us to call the friendly beekeeper who will come right over and save the bees and take them to his property where they will be happy and produce lots of honey and pollinate our crops.

I don't know where or if she studied entomology or how much hands-on experience she has had with Africanized honeybees, but there are a number of things I would like to say regarding her article.

Everyone knows that honeybees are very important as a source of honey and as pollinators to many crops, and that right now the beekeeping industry is having many problems. No one disputes that.

But when concerned, but uniformed people try to convince the public that Africanized Honeybees (AHB) are not a very real danger, then something must be said. I am talking about feral beehives found in urban not in agricultural areas.

Here are some points to consider:

- If you find a beehive on your property, you will not know if they are AHB or European honeybees (EHB) by looking at them, or even by studying their behavior. You will need to collect a sample of 50 bees and send them to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Apiary Inspection Division, in Gainesville. Then you will wait several weeks for test results. In the meantime, if those bees become aggressive because some kid rode by on his bike and rang the bell and the kid gets stung, well, what then? Yes, be humane to the bees. Take the chance. (He's not my kid!)
- Or if you find a nest, do as Ms. Campbell says in her article, call the local friendly beekeeper, as I said above. But... most of these feral hives are in places such as on the branches of a tree, or in a box fixed to the side of a house, or inside the wall of a house, or other place where it would be impossible to remove the bees without causing a great amount of moving, cutting of branches, etc. etc. The bees would begin to attack after about 10 seconds. Even EHB would attack if provoked like that!
- Ms. Campbell is happy to keep a beehive in her house. I hope the Department of Health is reading these articles and has enough sense to take action about this before the inevitable happens. If nothing else, there are zoning laws to protect Ms. Campbell's neighbors, who I hope read this and think about their safety.

- Ms. Campbell thinks that the AHBs' DNA will dilute the EHBs'. The AHB have been mixing genes with EHBs for 50 years now since leaving Brazil, and the aggressive traits (and other traits) that they exhibit were dominant then, and are still dominant. Perhaps after another 50 years they will not be so aggressive.
- Africanized honeybees are different than European honeybees. They are dangerous, and the media is quite correct in reporting them as such. Denying the facts is dangerous. Here are some facts:
  - In Mexico about 200 people have died from AHB stings since they first arrived in Mexico in 1985.
  - There have been about 20 deaths in the US since AHB arrived in Texas in 1990. The authorities in Texas now consider the state to be "Africanized" and all feral beehives are destroyed. We need to declare Florida, at least south Florida, as "Africanized" and act accordingly.
  - The number of incidents of encounters with AHB in south Florida has increased dramatically in the last few months. In 2005 I received about 2 calls from people asking for help with beehives for the entire year. Just last week I received 4 calls with 24 hours! It is increasing: it is getting worse.
  - Bee control experts (pest control operators) need to be called in when a feral hive is found and they must be licensed by the State of Florida to be able to legally apply pesticides. A beekeeper is usually not a licensed pest control operator, so he can not legally apply pesticides on properties other than his own. Therefore in the hypothetical case that a beekeeper is called in to "remove" a hive and take it "someplace safe," and the bees become aggressive (most likely scenario) that beekeeper may not be able to control the bees. The beekeeper would probably be safe in his beesuit, but nearby homeowners or children in nearby schools, and domestic animals, will be in harms way. Are people willing to risk the health and safety of their children and pets (and themselves!) to save hives that are most likely Africanized bees? Consider a pet dog tethered to a pole in the next door neighbor's yard and it is attacked by AHB. That dog would not be able to run away and could receive multiple stings that would probably kill it. I actually like bees, but personally, I prefer children and dogs.
  - Schools have Fire Drills. They had better start having Bee Drills! (Not a joke!)

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