

Oh, Death Where Is Thy Sting?

Jim Fischer

Recently, there have been a number of municipalities who were prompted to consider restricting or even prohibiting the keeping of bees. The usual scenario involves someone who fears bees, and demands that the local government legislate the bees away through restrictions on beekeeping.

Never mind that this won't reduce the number of wasps, yellow jackets and other stinging insects in the area one bit. Never mind that bees can forage miles away from their hives and pay no attention to municipal boundaries, the issue might come up.

We can blame *Varroa* and tracheal mites for this. Feral colonies have become very rare since the 1980s as a result of these parasites, and as a result, an entire generation has gone from childhood to parenthood with a very low probability of stepping on a bee while barefoot. A foraging honey bee is an unusual visitor to the modern yard. Not having ever seen the effects a bee sting, the perfectly normal localized swelling around the sting is viewed as an "allergic reaction," and anyone stung is then presumed to be "allergic to bee stings" as a result.

Those who grew up before the devastation of feral colonies are much more likely to have been stung multiple times as a child, so they don't have an irrational fear of bees. Softball games were a regular event in my backyard, and we had a good crop of dandelions, clover, and weeds, so it was only a matter of time until someone stepped on a bee. Of course we were barefoot. It was Summer!

The usual treatment was a hug and a cookie. Yes, there may have been some localized swelling, and of course there were tears, but this did not stop the stung child from playing their position, and taking their turn at bat.

These days, a single bee sting is viewed as life-threatening by parents who are convinced by advertising and paternalistic regulations that their children need thousands of dollars in safety equipment that most beekeepers grew up without (bicycle helmets, baseball batting helmets, air bags, seat belts, anti-lock brakes, water filters, air purifiers, smoke detectors, soccer shin pads, skateboarding knee pads, the list goes on forever).

It is a wonder that any of us survived to adulthood given the list of "must have" items that we grew up without. It may be a futile effort to try to educate a neighbor about the fact that it is extremely difficult to even get stung by a foraging bee. We now live in an era where zoning laws prohibit tree houses!

If you are a beekeeper, you may be viewed as not only "strange," but a bigger threat to children than a child molester. Face it, you do appear a tad strange to modern folks – you have an affinity for not just bugs, but bugs that can sting. This is highly unusual in communities where dandelions and clover are considered weeds to be eradicated by the Chem-Lawn man, and yards look like putting greens rather than being permanently scarred with the faint outline of baseball diamonds.

So, what's a beekeeper to do? Offer some facts. The local government clearly has a responsibility to protect its citizens from undue risk, so define for them in clear terms exactly what sort of risk are posed by bees relative to other common risks.

Make a photocopy of this article, and simply hand it to whatever authorities are considering the issue, or download it from www.bee-quick.com/reprints/.

The question "Oh Death, Where Is Thy Sting?" has remained unanswered since it was first asked (The quote is from *I Corinthians 15:55* in the Bible, so we've had several thousand years to think about it.)

The reason that the question remains unanswered is that it is hard to find the sting in death, as there are very few deaths from stings.

In 2000 (the most recent year for which data has been reported to the World Health Organization) 54 people were reported as having died in the USA due to encounters with any type of stinging insect (wasps, bees, hornets, yellow jackets, you-name-it). This number is sure to include some number of deaths due to insects other than bees, and can also be assumed to include a certain number of deaths from "Africanized" Bees, something that is simply not an issue in most of the country.



In Canada, two people were reported as having died in 2000 from insect stings.

Canada has no “Africanized” bees, but has about the same percentage of their population keeping bees in suburban and urban areas as in the U.S. Canada is thereby a better model than the U.S. for how “risky” bees are if one wants to eliminate the “Africanized” bee factor, which would be reasonable for places where there are no “Africanized” bees.

When you look at mortality versus population, the odds of dying from the sting of an insect in any one year are:

- U.S.: 1 in 5,555,556
- Canada: 1 in 16,666,667

In contrast, there are many many other things that are much more dangerous and kill many more people every year. Things that are much more within the legitimate regulatory grasp of a municipality than bees, and things that can be controlled by a municipality. Lots of things kill many more people.

Things like walking down the street.

In the U.S.:			
What Killed People	Deaths in 2000	Odds of 1 in	How many times more risk of death than from stings?
Pedestrian Hit By:			
Passenger Vehicle	3101	93,633	59.3
Truck/Bus	295	990,099	5.6
Train	449	649,351	8.6
Stairways	1307	222,222	25.0
Slip/Trip On Level	565	515,464	10.8
Fall Involving Bed	450	649,351	8.6
In Canada:			
What Killed People	Deaths in 2000	Odds of 1 in	How many times more risk of death than from stings?
Pedestrian Hit By:			
Passenger Vehicle	209	154,321	108.0
Truck/Bus	28	1,162,791	14.3
Train	32	1,010,101	16.5
Stairways	236	136,612	122.0
Slip/Trip On Level	85	380,228	43.8
Fall Involving Bed	62	520,833	32.0

So, if the town fathers want to do something to protect those who are unable to protect themselves, they should start with a ban on walking down the street, all passenger vehicles, all stairways, and all walking on level surfaces.

Note that the bus is much safer, so everyone will have to take the bus everywhere, even if the journey would only be a few steps. Busses can't go up stairways very well, so they will also have to mandate elevators for all multi-story buildings.

When they are done with that, the next logical item to ban would be either beds or trains. (I have no

“The chances of dying from a bee sting are remote. The likelihood of convincing some folks of that is equally remote.”

idea what to do about beds ON trains, but one might jump to the conclusion that they would be much more risky than either one alone.)

Since all the items listed are common in nearly every town, they are a much more serious risk to the entire population rather than a risk to a tiny subset of the population who were dealt a bad genetic hand of cards, yet have made no effort to obtain a readily-available cure for the affliction.

Moreover, municipalities can impose bans on things like walking and passenger vehicles and expect to be able to enforce them. In contrast, a “ban” on beehives within the municipal limits is easy to prove as useless, ineffective, and providing no tangible amount of additional protection, even to the one person who has an affliction that they refuse to treat. Stinging insects fly where they wish. No one can stop them.

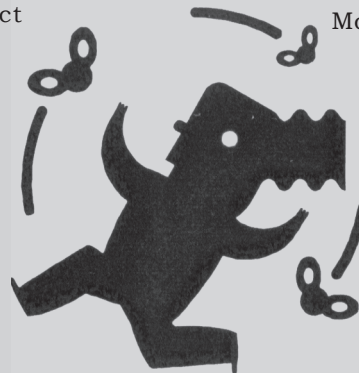
Insects tend to be oblivious to political boundaries. Yellow jackets and wasps would be nearly impossible to eradicate, making any “ban” on bees alone even more useless.

While presenting these statistics may not directly convince the local government officials to change their minds, presenting these statistics to the local press would allow them to have a grand time poking fun at how the government officials deal with the basic concept of risk management, which would then have a high probability of prompting the outcome you desire.

As another sanity check and point of reference, in 2000, 65 people died in the U.S. of food poisoning (“gastroenteritis of presumed infectious origin”) and in Canada, 13 people died.

Was this the “quiche of death”? **BC**

Data Source: World Health Organization Mortality Data <http://www.nationmaster.com/cat/Mortality>



James Fischer keeps bees in the mountains of Virginia and has a morbid fascination with mortality statistics.