

# **What ist organic beekeeping? Just the avoidance of pesticides ? Or does organic beekeeping hast o improve the health oft he bees?**

FIBL Workshop, BioFach 2014

Conference for organic beekeeping, Bologna März 2014

1. Since the beginning, in 1994 up to now, the standards of organic beekeeping are mainly focused on the avoidance of pesticides.

Beside this main focus, the standards control the use of non-synthetic material and the feeding of the bees with organic sugar.

Only the demeter standards, as an exception, have a second main focus on a very bee-friendly and nature related colony management, as working with the swarming attitude for reproduction and natural comb building in respect to the nature of the bees.

2. In the past, 20 years ago, the varroa mite and the residues in wax and honey, caused by chemical treatment, had been the main problem for us as beekeepers. It was useful and sensible, to put the avoidance of pesticides on the focus and to look for better ways in varroatreatment, which do not cause residues.

It is also a merit of organic beekeeping that organic acids are now used from many beekeepers and that these pay attention to the quality of wax.

3. But the times, they are changing and also the circumstances do.

I am convinced, that now, the standards are not more up to date and need further development. Because they are not suitable to the high value standards of organic agriculture in general. And, they do not fit to the current problems of bees and beekeeping. They do not show any perspectives to solve the crisis of beekeeping.

Organic agriculture had always been based on ecological and ethical values, like the production process in cycles, self-regulation of natural systems, use of natural compounds and further ethical, social and ecological impacts.

During the last 20 years an intense discussion about ethical values took place in the organic movement. And as a result of this process, the standards were also focussed on

health and welfare of animals and plants, respect and care towards the nature of species and also towards their individuality.

One reason for this was the intrinsic value of the beings, but also the conviction to support and improve vitality and health by this way of agriculture.

4. The standards of organic beekeeping have not been included in this process. And so, they persist only on a non-chemical level and need further development, towards these values..

In the common beekeeping standards I find less contribution to improve the health and the vitality of the bees. And I find no attitude which expresses respect and care towards the natural life of the bees and towards intrinsic value.

„This is not correct“ organic beekeepers may say, who do not agree with my opinion.

„Look to some private standards and you will find statements like- the organic beekeeper has to pay attention to the swarming attitude.“

But, I am not impressed by these statements. Such a general statement without consequences in practice means nothing. A beekeeper has always to pay attention to the swarming process, also if he wants to suppress it.

The organic standards pay strong attention to varroa treatment. But they give the beekeeper nearly total liberty in managing their colonies. He may do with his colonies what ever he wants. And naturally, he wants a maximum of honey crop. To gain this, organic beekeepers use the same methods as the conventional beekeepers.

So, I think, the actual standards of organic beekeeping are an anachronism:

-towards the values underlying the standards or organic agriculture

-and organic beekeeping persists on the first step of converting to organic agriculture – the non chemical approach.

-The agro-ecological step and the integrity step are yet missing.

5. I see another reason for this need to further development: The bees themselves and their actual needs.

During the last 15 years, vitality and health of the bees decreased significantly. The number of colony losses increased. The bees became more susceptible than in former times.

According to the spirit and the values of organic agriculture, the organic beekeepers should try to improve vitality and health by a colony management, which is close to the nature of the bees and strictly based on respect and care towards the nature of the bees. An organic beekeeper should work with his bees and not against their nature.

6. There exist many examples, that health and vitality of the bees improved, directly related to reduced and less intensive colony management. I want to point out only 2 examples:
7. One is the Gotland project. There, on the island of Gotland in the Baltic sea, 150 colonies lived from 1999-2005 without human interference and without varroa treatment. Only storage was completed before winter. Many colonies died from varroa in the first years, but after 4 years the surviving colonies showed tolerance and resistance towards varroa. Some of these colonies still live now at this place without any varroa treatment..

The second example happened in our bee project on the SEKEM farm in Egypt. There we could observe, that weak and ill colonies improved health after reducing intense artificial manipulation, like feeding antibiotics, etc

So, I am convinced that we now need standards which put the focus on the health and vitality of the bees. Besides of a good honey crop, the organic beekeeper has to work with his bees in a manner that improves their health and vitality. The basic has to be respect and care towards the nature of the bees and towards and the individuality of the hives.