

Kevin Sander | February 11, 2018



Beekeeping in Paraguay

PROMOTING APICULTURE AS A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER – A
PERSONAL ACCOUNT

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25, from Lake Stevens, Washington. I graduated from the University of Washington in 2016 with a BA in International Studies and Chinese language, which I immediately put to good use by joining Peace Corps as an Agricultural Extensionist in Paraguay (sarcasm). Before leaving, however, I received my apprentice level beekeeping certification through the NWDBA and had the opportunity to work

with several of its members.

Currently I live in a small, agricultural community called Mburika Retã, just outside of San Juan Bautista, Paraguay. I am an agricultural extensionist, meaning I promote a variety of ways in which farmers can diversify their crops, increase yields, and improve their soil. I also work in animal husbandry, chiefly in beekeeping which is the subject of this report.

Apiculture in Paraguay

Paraguay is a sunny, sub-tropical country with ample nectar flows throughout most of the year and a very short, mild winter. Most honeybees here are Africanized, varroa is extremely rare, and most beekeepers use top bar hives. Otherwise, there are few differences between apiculture here and Western Washington.

While I've found Africanized bees still manageable, they do require a greater degree of caution. We work only under perfect conditions and employ smokers liberally. Almost any sign of aggression is reason enough to suspend work being done and leave the hive alone. They are also more prone to swarm, making diligent space management imperative. Conversely, there is an abundance of wild swarms that can be captured easily – I caught two within my first forty days in site.



An improvised trashcan fire next to a batea (top bar hive) of Africanized bees. Without access to a smoker, a creative 'solution' was needed before revising the hive.

Amateur beekeepers here often have a mixture of Langstroths and top bar hives, but most modern equipment I've encountered is degraded. Without the knowledge of how to use or the carpentry skills needed to maintain a Langstroth, many boxes become little more than small top bar hives and difficult to manage. Most Paraguayan beekeepers are extremely small scale (1-2 hives) and

relatively poor and the necessary inputs for effectively using Langstroths (stamped wax, new frames, and centrifuges) are usually out of reach. It is my opinion that, in most cases, a KTBH system (known as a batea here) is more sustainable given its relatively low cost and ease of maintenance, and therefore I usually promote it.

The market for honey is extremely strong in Paraguay. 1 liter of honey can easily sell for 50,000 Guarani (around \$10 USD, a significant sum) and a beekeeper is almost guaranteed to sell out within an hour or two of taking their product to the local market. Wax, however, is not valued and is usually discarded. I have been encouraging beekeepers to keep their wax and have introduced a homemade solar wax melter. In the future, I hope to demonstrate how to make many different wax products and their potential value.

Volunteer Training



A volunteer led training for first time apiarists.

Peace Corps volunteers have been keeping bees in Paraguay for over 50 years. Beekeeping used to be a sector unto itself, meaning that there were once volunteers that worked exclusively in apiculture here. Today, beekeeping is just one part of a much broader agriculture sector. As such, very little formal beekeeping training is provided by Peace Corps Paraguay – only two trainings were provided in my first six

months. However, there is an abundance of readings and resources passed between the volunteers themselves. Many volunteers have accrued extensive experience since coming to Paraguay and offer their knowledge and help to new volunteers in informal trainings. I have already hosted several training sessions in my own site for other volunteers, providing them the real, hands-on experiences needed to build confidence before promoting good bee management in their own sites.

Personal Experiences

Peace Corps Paraguay's Agricultural Extension program attracts volunteers with a wide range of agricultural backgrounds; from none at all, to post grads in the field, to small scale American farmers themselves. Thanks to the NWDBA, I came to Paraguay with the most beekeeping experience in my group. Knowing apiculture was my strength, Peace Corps afforded me the opportunity to apprentice with John Menz, another volunteer with a rich background in beekeeping that was nearing the end of his service. He showed me the basics of working with Africanized bees, top bar hives, and helped me establish relationships with several local beekeepers. It was also thanks to John that I inherited enough equipment and bee suits to start my own

operation in site immediately. I currently have a forested apiary with three KTBHs and have trapped swarms in two of them already.



I have found children to be the most enthusiastic to take up beekeeping. The vast majority of my work so far has thus been teaching good hive management to kids ranging in age from 7-15. They tend to be the most willing to listen and most likely to apply new management techniques.

While some are already adept enough to manage their own hives, all the protective equipment and smokers we use are provided by me. It is my hope that we can use a portion of the profits from honey to invest in equipment that they can use after I've left but making that a priority is a challenge. Suits and smokers are expensive and difficult to find, and most farmers have more pressing needs for the money. Still, if the farmer wishes to make honey production a major source of income, I encourage them to either invest in buying or making said equipment.



For all intents and purposes, I am a first-year beekeeper and have much to learn still. Yet I find myself in a teaching position now and it is only due to the experiences and training I received through the NWDBA, its members, and other Peace Corps volunteers (coupled with exhaustive reading) that I am able to help develop new beekeepers here in Paraguay.

SPECIAL THANKS

I want to thank...

Mark Salser for his excellent Apprentice Beekeeping course and continued service as president of the NWDBA.

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Jeff Thompson for his mentorship. Jeff afforded me many opportunities to work with his bees and shared with me his wealth of experience, without which I would not be in the position I am now.

John Menz for helping me adjust to life in Paraguay and sharing with me the specifics of beekeeping here.