



Rural Living

Threats to Pollinators discussed in Elmwood

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ELMWOOD - "Neonicotinoids could be a disaster waiting to happen." That was one of the warnings that Dr. Peter Kevan, a professor in biology from the University of Guelph, delivered at a recent speaking event sponsored by Saugeen Conservation and held at the Elmwood Community Center.

The evening of speakers was one of a series put on by Saugeen Conservation entitled, Insect Pollination and Agro-ecological Services: Opportunities from Watershed Habitat Management, and was introduced by Jo-Anne Harbinson, manager of water resources and stewardship services.

Although Kevan's comments on the possible dangers of neonicotinoids, a form of pesticide, came mostly in response to questions from the audience, he stressed during his talk the importance of pollinators in general. In terms of agriculture, he stated that, "For every one in three bites of food that you eat, thank a pollinator." Kevan also discussed the wide variety of insects that pollinate plants, including flies, wasps, and over 900 species of bees in Canada. It is because of this pollination that plants produce many of the fruits and vegetables that they do.

He explained how, in certain areas of farming, pollinators such as honey or bumble bees are brought in to ensure a good crop. One example was bumble bees, which are used to pollinate greenhouse tomatoes. Kevan also stressed how a great deal of pollination in farm crops is done through wild pollinators, but that despite the economic importance of such insects, they are not yet well understood.

The second speaker of the evening, Dr. Vernon Thomas, laid out in further detail the threats that wild pollinators face in Ontario, and gave some practical steps that would encourage their continued presence in our environment. He explained that before Europeans brought over certain species of bees to help with the pollinating of cultivated crops, it was wild pollinators, such as flies, sweat bees and butterflies, that did all the work in this part of the world.

Because of this, Thomas said, we need to also focus on wild pollinators as well as honey bees. He stressed that people in places such as southern Ontario, "Need to learn to co-habit with wild pollinators." One area where people can begin to do this, he explained to the audience, was to help conserve habitat for wild pollinators. To ensure wild pollinator habitat, Thomas listed certain practices, such as leaving roadsides unsprayed, as well public areas like hydro corridors and highway right of ways. For private landowners, he suggested leaving wild and untidy areas for pollinators to live in, explaining that, "tidiness for the sake of tidiness is sometimes not the right conservation approach."

Further details to do with the threats pollinators, including honey bees, might be facing from pesticide use, came up during the question and answer period following the talk.

Audience participant Nathan Carey, a member of the the Grey-Bruce Friends of Pollinators, asked Kevan if there was a scientific basis for a moratorium on neonicotinoids. Kevan responded by stating that, "There is certainly very good reason to be suspicious of neonicotinoids." However, he went on that explain that at the moment it cannot be stated that neonicotinoids are specifically causing the current losses in the beekeeping industry, but that rather it can be said that neonicotinoids are part of the "sweep of stresses" causing the deaths among honey bee populations.

Part of the problem, Kevan pointed out, is that much of what is happening to pollinators in Canada is just not really understood very well at the moment. This is partly due, he elaborated, to there being little money available for neonicotinoid research. Canadian scientific policy requires researchers such as himself, to have endorsement from industry in order to receive money from government granting agencies. This is something that is unlikely to happen in this field, Kevan said, since companies will feel that they are exposing their business to risk by supporting this kind of research.

Kevan summed up his concern by stating, "We have a situation with neonicotinoids now which is an exact parallel with the previous situation with DDTs... where there was broad scale use over the entire landscape, and where this poison was everywhere.... It is my feeling that we're in for a kick in the back side as neonicotinoids are being spread over huge areas of farmland."

The next speaking event will be on the Emerald Ash Borer in the Saugeen watershed, and will be held tonight (Thursday) at 7 p.m. at the Grey County Agricultural Services.