

Beepocalypse Not

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The August 19 *Time* magazine [cover](#) asks readers to contemplate “A World Without Bees.” Newspaper stories and anti-pesticide groups are promoting similar concerns, and suggesting that well-publicized bee die-offs could lead to global food shortages.

Thankfully, threats of a “bee-pocalypse” are wildly exaggerated. Hard data on how bees are really doing actually paints a much more hopeful picture.

Despite some real problems — particularly the global spread of the parasitical *Varroa destructor* mite, which the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) calls the number one bee killer — managed honeybees have increased worldwide. Globally, honeybee populations have increased 45 percent since 1961, [according to](#) the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization. [Bees are booming](#) in Asia, Africa and South America. In Australia, honeybees are doing so well that the land down under exports queen bees for new colonies around the world.

Even in Europe the numbers tell a positive story. In Western Europe, bee populations are gradually, but steadily increasing, as this [chart](#) illustrates. Much of the overall decline in European honeybee populations is due to a massive drop in managed honeybee hives in Eastern Europe, when subsidies ended during the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the United States, honeybee numbers began declining in the 1940s, with the loss of small farms and the later competition of cheaper honey imports, particularly from China.

As discussed in the [last installment](#) of this series, environmental activists point to neonicotinoids as the number one culprit in bee problems. The European Union even banned the chemicals — an action that is likely to make things worse, as farmers will be forced to return to older and more bee-lethal insecticides, such as pyrethroids.

But it is interesting that, since neonicotinoid pesticides began enjoying widespread use in the mid-1990s, overall bee declines appear to be leveling off and have even diminished. It’s also possible that the media frenzy that brought about the EU ban — similar to what environmental activists are now campaigning for the United States — could have been avoided if journalists had simply looked at the underlying numbers.

If you’ve been reading all the apocalyptic media stories, however, you’re bound to be wondering how this all jibes with a 31.1 percent rate of loss in colonies over the 2012/2013 winter season, [as reported](#) by USDA. Many journalists seem to have thought that means we have only three years left until bees are completely kaput. It doesn’t.

Beekeepers have always expected to lose significant numbers of bees over the winter. It’s a normal, natural, predictable event, but bees reproduce quickly and hives build up their strength again in the spring. Of course, higher rates of annual loss in colonies can create real hardship for beekeepers and make it more difficult to turn a profit — and thirty percent losses are about double normal levels. But profitability of beekeeping is a different question than whether bees are on the verge of disappearing.

The fact is, bee die-offs [have occurred frequently](#) in history. A study by bee researchers Robyn M. Underwood and Dennis vanEngelsdorp chronicles [over 25 significant bee die-offs](#) between 1868 and 2003. In fact, large-scale bee die offs were reported in Ireland in 950 AD, [more than a thousand years ago](#). But the bees are still with us and are likely to be for some time to come.

All these facts are ignored by anti-pesticide activists in their clamor for an immediate ban on neonicotinoid pesticides. They ignore the absence of evidence that these innovative pest control products do not impact bees when used correctly. They also ignore overwhelming evidence attributing problems that actually do exist to a massive, global spread of new threats to bees, particularly *Varroa*.

Taking a close look at the real numbers allows us all to catch our breath and relax.

The bottom line: worldwide trends show bees are flourishing. "A World Without Bees" is not likely.

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