# An Environmental Journalist's Lament

**Summer 2011** | Hannah Nordhaus


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In the fall of 2006, honey bees began dying in strange and unsettling ways. Entire colonies flew off en masse and simply vanished. More than a third of America's commercially managed hives collapsed in 36 states. In Europe, India, and Brazil, many beekeepers saw up to 90 percent of their colonies fail. Scientists named the phenomenon "Colony Collapse Disorder," or CCD, and the news of the honey bee's alarming decline was reported in media outlets everywhere. With one-third of the nation's crops pollinated by bees, concerns grew about what the honey bee's decline might portend for us. How would we feed ourselves if all the bees disappeared?

Speculation about the causes of the disorder ran from genetically-modified corn, to a sinister Chinese fungus to cell phone transmissions that led foragers astray ("They get distracted talking and never get any work done," someone quipped in a beekeeper chat room). But very quickly, many journalists settled on neonicotinoids -- pesticides that are applied to more than 140 different crops -- as the likely culprit. It seemed a familiar story of human greed and shortsightedness. With their callous disregard for nature, big chemical companies and big agriculture were killing the bees -- and threatening our own survival.

With the benefit of time, it has become clear that the story was a lot more complicated than that. But the rush to judgment and the end-of-days narratives it spawned should serve as a cautionary tale for environmental journalists eager to write the next blockbuster story of environmental decline. I should know. I almost wrote that story myself.

**1.**

As fate would have it, I was preparing to publish a feature about a colorful commercial beekeeper named John Miller in *High Country News*, a Colorado-based environmental magazine, when the colony collapse story broke. Miller keeps around 10,000 hives, trucking them around the country to pollinate crops and struggling mightily to keep his charges alive. With bees in the headlines, I did a quick rewrite and the story garnered more views on the magazine's website than any article in its history.

It was just the kind of break every journalist hopes for, and soon I was fielding inquiries from publishers interested in producing a book on the subject. They envisioned a hard-hitting investigation into big beekeeping, big agriculture, and the looming pollination crisis -- with heroes, villains, and impending ecological apocalypse. It would, like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* -- the 1962 bestseller that linked DDT to plummeting bird populations and human cancer and launched the modern environmental movement -- chronicle the crimes of

industry against nature. Substitute bees for birds and neonicotinoids for DDT, add a dollop of outrage, and voilà: *Silent Spring II*.

This sounded appealing. I had more to say about John Miller, his bees, and his daft and unrequited passion for these difficult creatures, and I had always wanted to write a book. But there was a problem: I had just had my first child, who brought me great joy but also considerable delays in putting together a book proposal. As I swaddled and dandled, other environmental journalists got to work. In 2008, a number of bee books hit the bookshelves.

These books had a lot in common with the original idea I had bandied about with publishers: they expounded on CCD and America's pollination crisis; they chronicled the crimes of the pesticide industry against bees; they evoked *Silent Spring*. Some also prominently employed a quotation attributed to Albert Einstein, one that had appeared in numerous articles since the crisis began: "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the earth, man would have no more than four years to live." This was an eye-opening quote, impressing upon readers the gravity of the situation: if the smartest guy ever was alarmed about the disappearing honey bee, we too should be afraid, right? Right -- except there's no evidence that Einstein ever said it. Einstein died in 1955; the first known mention of the quote appeared in 1994, in a pamphlet distributed during a political protest staged by French beekeepers objecting to the high cost of sugar fo feeding bees and a proposed reduction of tariffs on imported honey.

And there's also this: it simply isn't true. Honey bees are a crucial link in our agricultural system. They pollinate over 90 fruits and vegetables, including blueberries, canola, cherries, watermelon, lettuce, and almond trees. Bees are industrious, they are prolific, and they are mobile; there is no pollinator better suited to plying the landscape of modern agriculture. Without them, many crops would sputter or fail and our diet would be a far more lackluster affair.

But the honey bee's disappearance wouldn't necessarily mean the end of humanity. It wouldn't even mean the end of industrial agriculture. Much of our agricultural production does not require the pollination services of bees, and people have lived in lots of places where honey bees haven't. Humans dwelled for millennia in North America, for instance, before the European honey bee (the species found in most of the world's apiaries) arrived from England around 1620, on the same boats that brought the nation's first colonists an their crops. Honey bees have traveled the paths of human migration from Africa to Europe and Asia, then to North America, and they have flourished in most places. If they weren't so useful, you might even be tempted to call them an invasive species.

Honey bees have also disappeared before. In 1853, Lorenzo Langstroth, the 19th century beekeeper who invented the modern hive, described colonies that were "found, on being examined one morning, to be utterly deserted. The comb was empty, and the only symptom of life was the poor queen herself." In 1891 and 1896, large clusters of bees vanished in a case known as "May Disease." In the 1960s, bees vanished mysteriously in Texas, Louisiana, and California. In 1975, a similar epidemic cropped up in Australia, Mexico, and 27 US states. There were heavy losses in France from 1998 to 2000 and also in California in 2005, just two years before CCD was first diagnosed.

In fact, honey bees have been on human-assisted life support for a long time now. Much recent coverage of CCD has implied that America's recent honey bee apocalypse began in 2006, but it really began 20 years ago, when a vicious little mite arrived from Asia and wreaked havoc on American apiaries. Thanks to a relentless onslaught of global pests and pathogens since then, "wild" bees (which wer never in fact wild, but feral -- the offspring of swarms that had escaped from managed hives) have been wiped out across much of the United States. The bees that have survived are, with very, very few exceptions, commercially managed ones, kept aloft only by the effort of determined beekeepers like John Miller.

Indeed, there's nothing at all "natural" about the presence of honey bees in most places in the world. They're not native. Most of the plants they pollinate aren't native either. The modern honey bee is largely a human creation. You wouldn't know it from the media coverage, but for all the carnage in recent years, the actual number of honey bee colonies in the US has held steady, thanks to a robust queen-rearing industry that churns out hundreds of thousands of new queens each year. While honey bees are now experiencing worldwide die-offs, their populations are still much higher than in the past, thanks almost entirely to the commercial beekeeping industry.

So maybe the fictitious French Einstein had it backwards: if man disappeared off the face of the earth today, most European honey bee colonies would certainly have no more than four years to live.

**2.**

Covering the fate of the bees, and all the symbiotic relationships in which they are enmeshed -- with flowering plants, with their keepers, with the farmers who need commercial beekeepers to pollinate crops -- has called my attention to another troubled symbiotic connection: the one between journalists and environmental disaster.

Take last summer's BP oil spill in Louisiana. Covering the spill was the Super Bowl of environmental journalism. You couldn't have asked for a better disaster: the never-ending gusher, the oiled birds and tar balls, the callous foreign corporation and corrupt government agency. Everyone wanted in on the story, and many of my journalist friends sent delighted updates on Facebook about being sent to the Gulf Coast to cover the environmental story of the decade. I viewed their messages with envy -- because after having another baby, I was in no position to go off chasing oil slicks -- but also with a certain discomfort I couldn't put my finger on until recently, when *New Yorker*

staff writer Raffi Khatchadourian published an exhaustive investigation into the spill.

Khatchadourian disputed the notion that the BP-funded response to the spill was mismanaged and willfully negligent, as much of the contemporary coverage implied. He described an enormous effort that, while necessarily improvised and Byzantine, was mostly effective in cleaning up and dispersing the oil.

More of a disaster, he argued, was the media coverage of and political response to the spill. In the early days after the *Deepwater Horizon* sank, says Khatchadourian, there were lots of tight-focus shots of oily marshes, with "suffocating swirls of shimmery crude and sickly pelicans. The scenes were riveting and heartbreaking," he wrote, "but they fundamentally misrepresented the situation." There was, in fact, very little oil to be found in Louisiana's marshland. With just 25 miles of "heavy oiling" on the entire 1,600-mile Gulf coastline, "One had to travel, sometimes an hour or more, to see the oil -- one had to hunt for it."

But of course, hunt we did, and those images -- sensationalized depictions that exaggerated the spill's damage -- often spurred responders and politicians to insist on measures that were costly, ineffectual, and perhaps even harmful. It will be years before we fully understand the long-term effects of the oil and dispersants on the Gulf ecosystem and human health, but the Gulf of Mexico is thought to absorb more than 50 million gallons of oil a year from natural seeps in the ocean floor, and its biology is remarkably well-adapted to absorbing oil. It's less well-adapted to the dredging and building of artificial berms, and the placing of booms that Gulf Coast lawmakers insisted BP install in many ecologically sensitive areas as public outcry mounted. In his story, Khatchadourian asked the question that lingered in the back of my head all summer: is it possible that the breathless coverage of and knee-jerk responses to the disaster actually made the ecological damage worse?

The honey bee's recent problems have occasioned a similar rush to judgment. Before any studies had been conducted on the causes of CCD, three books and countless articles came out touting pesticides as the malady's cause. Had I been able to turn a book around quickly, I might have leapt to the same conclusions. But I was late to the party, and as more studies came out and I came to better understand the science, I became less and less convinced that pesticides provided a convincing explanation for beekeepers' losses.

In June 2009, a comprehensive USDA report reached the same conclusion: "It now seems clear that no single factor alone is responsible for the malady." Instead, a combination of factors is probably to blame -- some sort of interaction between pathogens and variables such as nutrition, weather, parasites, pesticides, and the insults of long-distance beekeeping. "I go back to the death by a thousand paper cuts theory," John Miller told me. "That it's some combination of stress, accumulated pathogens, chemical materials, overstimulation, near-starvation -- an accumulation of what we do."

**3.**

With the luxury of time, I was freed from the obligation to write the next *Silent Spring*. *The Beekeeper's Lament*, in bookstores in June, does, of course, explore the reasons bees are dying. But it also tells a complicated story about a man named John Miller, who really, inexplicably, loves bees. He loves them so much that he doesn't mind all the insults and indignities of modern beekeeping: pests and plagues and poor honey prices; droughts and deluges and the daunting logistics required to transport 10,000 hives from the northern Plains to the Central Valley and back each year. He loves them despite all the practices he has to engage in that hurt them -- stacking them on semi-trucks, feeding them miticides and fungicides and antibiotics, waking them up early from their winter slumber to make him money pollinating almonds.

There are no neatly presented demons in the story. Miller is a big beekeeper who pollinates crops for big agriculture, but he's not in it to make big money; if he were, he would have gone into software sales, or real estate, or something that actually *makes* a lot of money. Still, he does manage to earn a living and keep people employed in rural economies that offer few other opportunities. That isn't as sexy or easy a story to tell as the one about the evil chemical companies and the innocent wild creatures. But I hope it's one that can illuminate the complex relationships between the food on our tables, the people who grow it, the bees that pollinate all those millions of acres of crops, and the bee guys, like John Miller, who care for those bees.

By contrast, reflexively blaming pesticides for all of the honey bee's problems may in fact slow the search for solutions. Honey bees have enough to do without having to serve as our exoskeletal canaries in a coalmine. Dying bees have become symbols of environmental sin, of faceless corporations out to ransack nature. Such is the story environmental journalism tells all too often. But it's not always the story that best helps us understand how we live in this world of nearly seven billion hungry people, or how we might square our ecological concerns and commitments with that reality. By engaging in simplistic and sometimes misleading environmental narratives -- by exaggerating the stakes and brushing over the inconvenient facts that stand in the way of foregone conclusions -- we do our field, and our subjects, a disservice. /

*"The Beekeeper's Lament" by Hannah Nordhaus is available at Amazon and in bookstores now.*

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