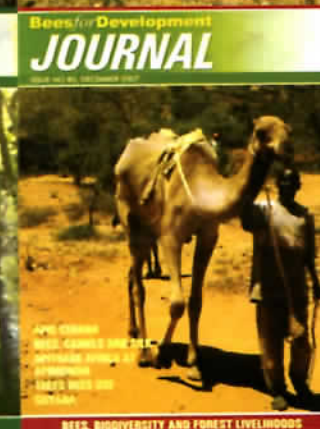
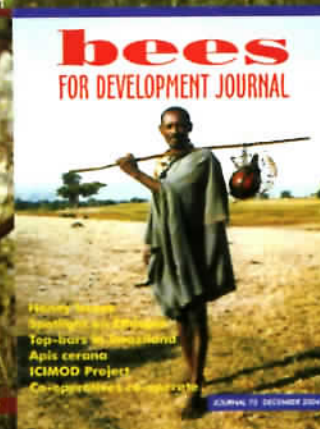
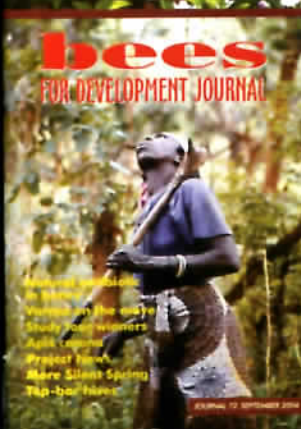
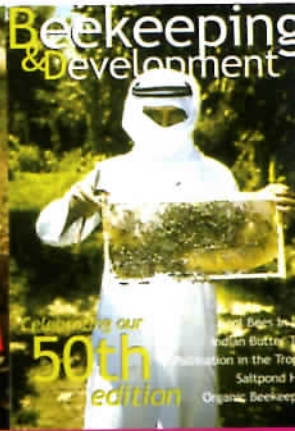
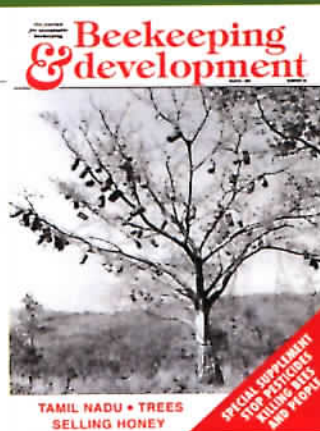


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# Creation of a bee sanctuary

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**Keywords:** *Apis cerana*, biodiversity, biosphere, conservation, honey hunting, India, Nilgiris, *shola*, Toda

We are working to conserve indigenous *Apis cerana* honey bees, their flora and the *shola* woodland habitat in the ancestral lands of Toda people in South India.

The Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve forms part of the Western Ghats in India and includes diverse ecological systems with unique natural and cultural heritage. At higher altitudes (1,800–2,500 m) the grasslands and montane forests (locally known as *shola*) are homelands for the Toda indigenous community.

The grasslands and *shola* woodland patches provide nectar and pollen sources for *Apis cerana*, one of Asia's indigenous honey bees, while cavities in the *shola* trees provide nesting habitat. These cavities are named *Shiife* by Toda people and are traditionally owned and marked, and their ownership transferred from generation to generation.

## The cavity beekeeping system

Natural cavities in living trees within a patch of forest are identified by the Toda people. The cavity entrance is enlarged to provide access to the honeycombs. At the beginning of November these cavities are cleaned and capstones are placed at the entrance. Bee holes are made for the bees to enter, and by 15 November onwards, swarms begin to occupy these cavities and build combs. During the fourth week of January the honey hunter will collect one brood comb to offer to the forest deity. By 15 February to mid May honeycombs are collected three or four times. By the middle of June the bees migrate to the plains as the monsoon season begins. The honey hunter will begin his operation again in November. The end of the monsoon and flowering season are crucial ecological indicators for the bees and beekeepers. Todas pass to their children the legends and adventures about these cavities, bees and forests.

Development initiatives have brought other non-Toda communities into



Placing the capstone at the entrance to the cavity where *Apis cerana* nest

nearby areas, and this labour force brought in for forest operations has largely ignored the cultural and ecological values of these bee habitats. People have indiscriminately raided and destroyed the habitat.

The Nilgiri District Administration and Tamil Nadu Forest Department recognised the Toda settlement and neighbouring forest *Bekapathy Mund* as being in need of protection to conserve bee habitats, and now a bee sanctuary of 14.5 km<sup>2</sup> has been declared. This area is unique virgin forest and grassland, and contains approximately 62 tree cavities containing *Apis cerana* honey bees. It also includes the sacred Toda conical temple and sacred dairy.

The Sanctuary is being monitored by the community. Fortnightly data collection began in November 2010, recording date of honey bee arrival,

(below) Toda house





the number of occupied and vacant cavities, harvesting and floral diversity. Awareness campaigns, a one day ecological show and posters on ecological linkages are also part of the programme. A booklet will be prepared at the end of the first year. We hope that this will lead to conservation of *shola* woodland, the bees and the whole ecosystem.

## Next

- Surveying and documenting all cavities occupied by honey bees.
- Documenting the cavities which are not harvested and the bees' migration dates.
- Recording floral details and renewal rights over the cavities in accordance with traditional family rights.
- Awareness campaigns, posters, responsible eco tourism and community conservation and monitoring practices.
- Creating a watchdog committee from the local Toda community to restrict destruction of Toda traditional domains and marked territories.

*Funding support* Hill Area Development Programme, Nilgiris.

*Implementing and capacity building* Keystone Foundation: Aradu Kuttan, Robert Leo, Saneesh and community members.

*Also part of the team* The Divisional Forest Officer, the Forest Range Officer and Watchers of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department.

## Further reading

Keystone Foundation in *BfD Journal* 87

DUTT,R.; SEELEY,J.; ROY,P (eds) (2009) *Proceedings of the Biodiversity and Livelihoods Conference*. Write-Arm, Bangalore, India.



*Inside a Toda house: the author is on the right*



*Shola woodland*