



Bee Clubs – What Are They Good for?

by SHELLEY STUART

“A lot of folks don’t see the value in attending club meetings when they can either watch it online via Zoom/Webex or just watch YouTube videos.”¹

In a previous article (“So you [don’t] wanna be your club’s president?” August 2022) I presented survey results about bee club presidents and the ease (or not) of finding a successor.² An assumption underlies the entire article: that bee clubs matter.

But do they, really?

As part of my survey, I posed questions about clubs and the respondents’ participation in those clubs. Coincidentally an informal poll popped up on a popular bee forum, asking if technology has made bee clubs and associations irrelevant. Of the poll’s 70 respondents, 70% answered that question either “Absolutely” or “Yes, but only kind of.”

Both the survey and the poll have problems with self-selection. The title of mine (“Bee clubs and their leadership”) likely engaged those who had participated in clubs (87% of the respondents had joined at least one), and a survey posted on an internet forum reaches an online-leaning audience. But the pandemic forced us to connect in ways that upended the status quo, so it’s worth considering: Are bee clubs going the way of the tracheal mite, smothered by new technology?

WHAT IS A BEE CLUB?

“Clubs are for pumping of self-esteem of useless idiots.”

“I think the clubs play a vital role in the education of new beekeepers.”

Pulling data from ABJ’s website,³ as well as the American Beekeeping

Federation,⁴ we learn that the United States has over 600 bee clubs or associations listed. (I suspect the real number is likely much higher; both sources rely on clubs to proactively ask for listings, or to join the ABF.) But what does that mean, exactly? What is a “club”? Looking at that question through a sociology lens, a club provides three important things for its members: “(a) distribution of knowledge about [beekeeping], (b) opportunities for sociability, and (c) access to identity symbols.”⁵ In our case, “identity symbols” can mean books, war stories and tall tales, but could include traditional items like club logos, patches, stickers, postcards, and so on. This definition allows for a wide organizational setup when defining a “bee club.”

My club has officers, dues, monthly meetings, a teaching apiary. Yours may have a 501(c)(3) designation with a board of directors. Or perhaps your club is more like lunch with a group of local beekeepers on a semi-regular

basis to talk about the latest bee research, giving your household members a much-needed break from your obsession. Regardless of your group’s structure, if there’s learning, social interaction, and common symbology, you’ve got a club.

CLUBS DON’T TEACH NEW BEEKEEPERS — THEY RESCUE THEM

“Most new beekeepers don’t take the time to research before diving in, and then expect immediate miracle answers from more experienced beekeepers when things go wrong.”

“In my 3 years of keeping bees, [clubs] have been the most abundant resource for learning and getting reliable information that I have found. I would not be where I am on the learning curve had I not joined these clubs.”

“Distribution of knowledge about beekeeping” leaps off the page as perhaps the *raison d’être* of our bee clubs. After all, both online and in print, the

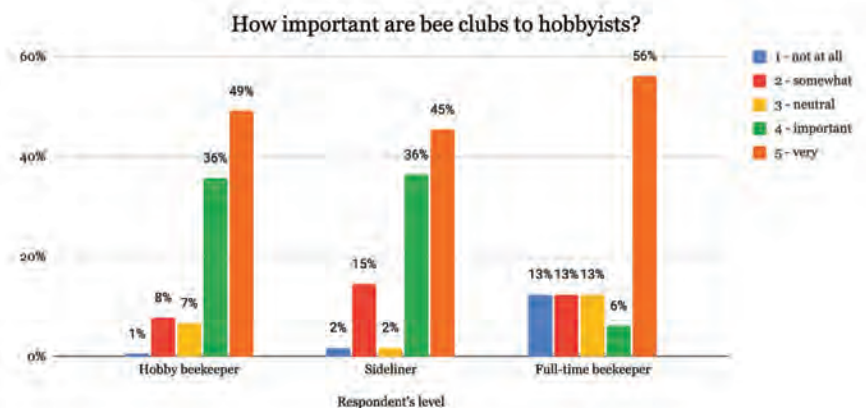


Fig. 1 No matter what level of beekeeper the respondent was, all groups of respondents felt that bee clubs are either important (34% total), or very important (49% total) to hobbyists. Total respondents: 250, self-identified as Hobbyists (179), Sideline (55) and Full-timers (16).

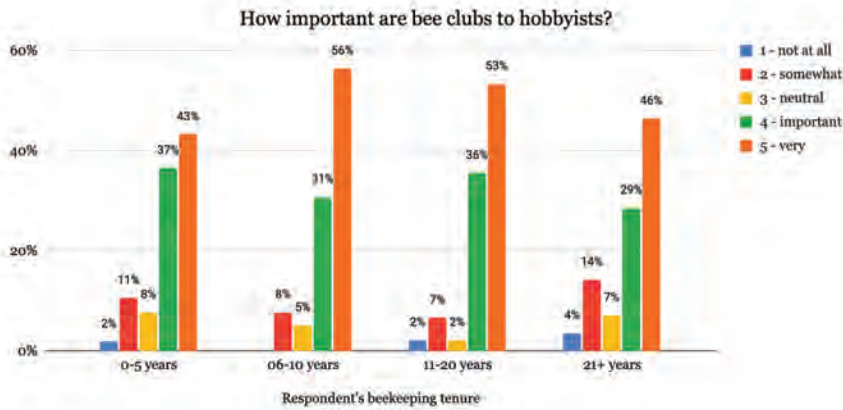


Fig. 2 The value of clubs for hobbyists through the eyes of experience

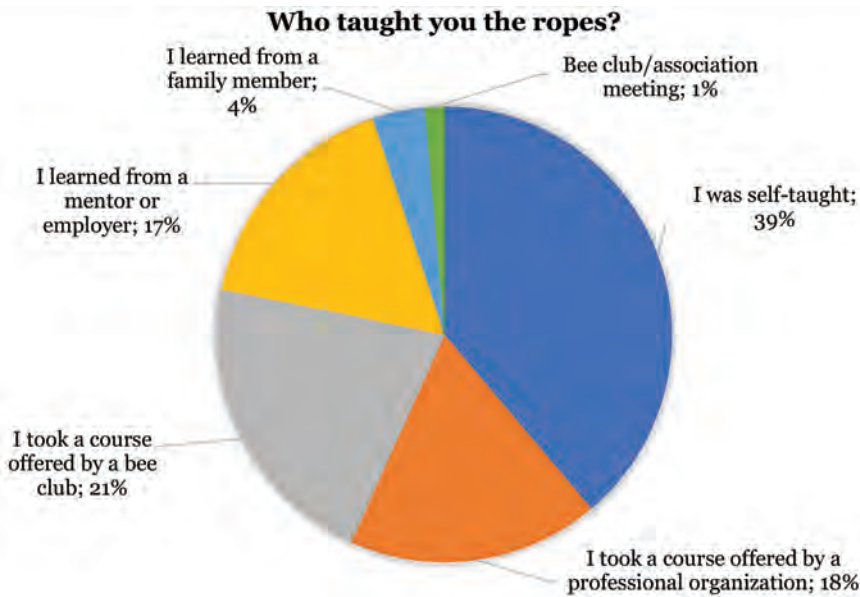


Fig. 3 "When you first started beekeeping, who taught you the ropes?" Most beekeepers did not learn from bee clubs when starting out.

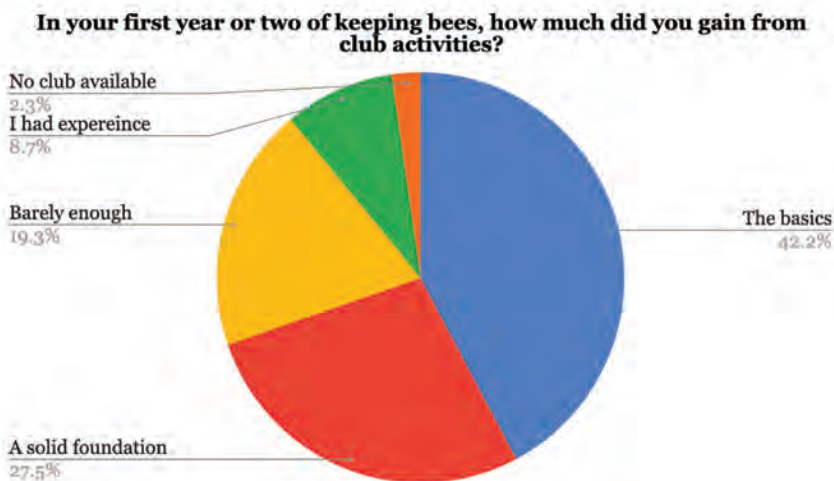


Fig. 4 "Club activities" include talks, conferences, discussion groups, one-on-ones, etc. (N=224).

advice given to new beekeepers—who have as many questions as they have bees—is: Don't watch YouTube channels, there's too much bad advice out there! Get thee to your local club! That implies a certain level of value of bee clubs for that cohort. It also tracks with data from the survey I conducted. Whether you crunch the numbers by the respondents' beekeeping level (Figure 1) or their years of experience (Figure 2), over 80% of them felt that bee clubs are either important or very important to the hobbyist.

But as we funnel the eager sponges of beekeepers to their local club, do we do them a disservice? Do clubs truly function as way to learn? On the surface when it comes to teaching beekeepers the ropes, the bee club falls very flat (Figure 3). Only 22% of the beekeepers who responded learned through a bee club and nearly 40% started their hobby in good, old-fashioned, do-it-myself style. This should not come as a surprise. If you consider other hobby livestock—chickens, ducks, miniature goats, pot-bellied pigs, etc.—beekeeping presents the lowest entry barrier. Avian or mammalian farm animals require space, decent structures, a constant supply of food, and a constant cleanup of the by-products of said food. They can be noisy, demanding, require medicine, suck up time, and need third-party care when the owner goes on vacation. Municipalities often craft laws around them to prevent impulse buys (particularly around Easter) and to allow (or prevent) animals in an urban or suburban area.

In contrast, if you spend ten minutes on a bee supply web site you'll be a beekeeper in May, with a complete starter kit and a package of bees to arrive by mail. From the novice's viewpoint, bees have a small footprint, find their own food, have nearly invisible excrement, can be left for two weeks or more without a pet sitter—and beekeepers are saving the planet (or at least our food supply). And frankly speaking, bees fall pretty low on the empathy chart for humans in general.⁶ If something goes wrong, well they're just bugs, not a cute chick or personable pig, and your neighbors aren't likely to call Animal Control on you.

But while beekeepers may not have gotten started through a club, bee clubs really step in during the first two years of beekeeping to fill a crucial knowledge chasm. Club-related activities gave beekeepers at least the basics, and for many a solid beekeep-

ing foundation, during their first two years of beekeeping (Figure 4). Here is where the novice beekeeper who jumped in with both feet weighed down by a 10-frame hive kit gets a much-needed life ring from the collective wisdom of fellow beekeepers.

Of course, the knowledge a club provides extends beyond beekeeping basics discussed above. Bee clubs also provide important local expertise: What's blooming now? Have you supered yet? What are your varroa counts like? Is the [local seasonal flower] on or off this year? But beekeepers can share this information without stepping foot outside the bee yard. The previous three years have taught us that the virtual club allows access to speakers they may never have been able to offer in person, whether the barrier be geography, cost, or the club's own size. So again, why bother with a physical club? Why shouldn't clubs shrug off brick-and-mortar confines in favor of the free virtual opportunities now available?

THE CASE FOR FACE-TO-FACE

"Forums such as [this one] are far more useful than 'clubs,' which tend not to tolerate diversity. But not all forums are as well-balanced."

"Bee clubs are a great way to meet new people, learn, and use as a resource if you have an issue."

These were questions I asked of Emma Walters, former Senior Honey Bee Extension Associate at the Cornell Dyce Lab for Honey Bee Studies. As part of her role as Extension Associate, Walters interacted with bee clubs throughout New York State, talking about anything from Integrated Pest Management to new apiary registration laws. Walters agrees that Zoom has opened up a world of speaker opportunities for bee clubs, but also emphasizes the importance of club teaching apiaries for the new beekeeper. "There's a ton of value to have people go into hives, see how an inspection is done, see what everything looks like and learn how to recognize various things. Even in this digital age where there's a lot of Zoom, that's something that really can't be covered like an in-person bee club can offer."

Thinking back to your own beginnings as a beekeeper, this likely resonates. After all, it's one thing to play "spot the queen" on a YouTube video with a cup of coffee in one hand and pause button in the other. It's quite

another to be holding that frame of swirling bees over an open hive with perturbed workers pinging your veil (the mesh of which you have to look through), something crawling up your pant leg (*it's just an ant, it's just an ant, it's just an ant*), sweat dripping down your side (*it's not a bee, it's not a bee, it's not a bee*), avoiding squishing bees when you flip the frame — don't drop the frame! — and knowing with 100% certainty that when you put that frame back the queen's going to scurry onto it just as you pull the next frame out ... *dang it, someone nailed me!*

Additionally, in-person talks afford a level of interaction that online does not. For the newer beekeeper, the after-lecture cookies and coffee socializing time may become part of the most formative moments of their beekeeping journey. Perhaps too shy to ask a question in front of an audience, this new beekeeper may feel much more comfortable approaching a speaker or a fellow club member after the talk to better understand the topic at hand or inquire about something they saw in their own hives just the day before. In this one-on-few situation those listening can piggyback on the starting question, allowing the conversation to flow from one topic to another. The face-to-face presence of the individuals allows for them to use body language and verbal cues to know when to add to the conversation or take it naturally in another direction. The one-on-many setup of an online presentation, with the inevitable network

lag and false starts, discourages these dynamic interactions.

ARE CLUBS JUST FOR NEW BEEKEEPERS?

"Unfortunately, many experienced members stop coming to club meetings. Clubs need to work harder to keep their experienced members engaged."

"Bee clubs can be the network that connect beekeepers to quality education. They are a great social network in what can be an isolating hobby. Beekeepers are delightfully weird and that's what makes them so likeable."

All of this learning and sociability is well and good for the beginner hobbyist, but somebody's got to bring that knowledge into the club for them to learn from. Why should the beekeeper who's been around the apiary a time or two be the one to answer the same questions over and over and over again every year from beekeepers who didn't bother to take a course when they ordered their kit? (*Get out of my apiary, you whippersnapper!*)

Fortunately, this fictitious curmudgeon appears to be in the minority (and admittedly might not have filled out the survey). It isn't until about 10 years of beekeeping do beekeepers start to feel like they're sharing more knowledge than they gain at their clubs (Figure 5). This part of the survey touched only lightly on this question, and more connections could be explored regarding the size of the club, and specifics about the flow and

How much bee-related knowledge do you learn from—or share with—your club?

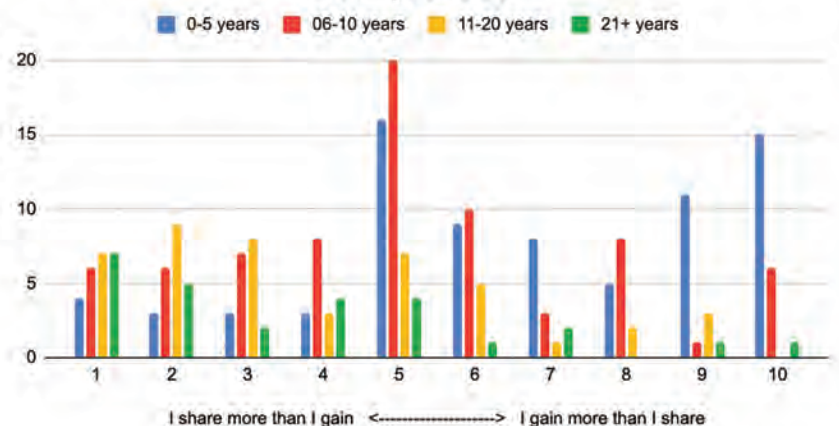


Fig. 5 Knowledge flow by beekeeping experience (in years). The Y axis is the number of respondents. The X is a scale of 1-10, where 1 means you share more than you gain, and 10 means you gain more knowledge than you share. So at far right, 15 respondents who've kept bees for 0-5 years feel they gain more than they share from their bee club. At the left end of the scale about 7 respondents who've kept bees for more than 21 years feel they share more knowledge than they gain.

quality of “bee-related knowledge” and so on. But from this bee’s-eye view, it looks like clubs continue to provide a service not just to the new beekeeper, but to the more experienced ones as well.

Like access to a club apiary, having — and keeping — experienced beekeepers is important for this knowledge exchange. It’s also difficult to accomplish. It forces club officers to balance the needs of the (many) new beekeepers just starting out with those of the (diminishing) experienced beekeepers who want new, or deeper, knowledge. Speaking from experience, it’s a challenge to keep everyone engaged. Summers at the teaching apiary — where officers sure can use an extra hand to lead a tour through a hive — are also prime time to get into your home apiary and accomplish what needs to be done for your own bees before the work week starts. On the other hand, fall or winter lectures about breeding varroa-resistant bees seem like an ethereal “someday” goal to beekeepers facing

their first winter challenges. Focus too much on one demographic and the other stops coming to meetings, and the club dwindles like a queenless spring hive.

IN SHORT: BEE CLUBS DO MATTER

“I really enjoy beekeeping and being part of a club. It’s nice to share strategies with fellow beekeepers, things that worked and things that haven’t. I have gained new friends from our club and have learned so much. I feel for other beekeepers when I read online that they are struggling or losing colonies and it is mainly due to lack of knowledge or access to other keepers with even a little bit of experience.”

For the most part beekeepers, like our bees, thrive in a community of shared resources. When lockdowns prohibited the customary vector for those shared resources (namely in-person meetings), our largely Boomer demographic had to adapt. Through the online outlets that bee clubs developed, beekeepers found new communities and exciting opportunities.

Over one winter I personally have had the chance to hear live talks from four corners of North America: Randy Oliver, Etienne Tardif, Michal Palmer, and Cameron Jack, and I virtually attended a Western Apicultural Society mini-conference, all of which was out of my reach to do in person (and not because of COVID). Rather than make clubs irrelevant, these online venues have added a tool to our clubs’ toolkit. We can use it to good advantage, without forgetting the very tangible impact the club offers to those who do attend in person.

One final thought stemming from the survey feedback, as well as other threads I read as I researched this topic: Many beekeepers complained about clubs being cliquish, unwelcome, political or — perhaps the biggest turn-off — used by the officers primarily to promote their own services or wares. Without association-level support or structural framework to guide them, club beginner classes can be a four-day spectacle or an inadequate 4-hour crash course. Clubs can provide varying degrees of sound advice and information, depending on what their members bring to the meetings.

These clubs matter too.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, quotes throughout are taken from the “Bee clubs and their leadership” survey and edited for clarity and/or privacy.
- 2 You can access data used in this article at <https://tinyurl.com/mwsevn23>
- 3 <https://americanbeejournal.com/tipolinks/beekeeping-associations/>
- 4 <https://www.abfnet.org/page/states>
- 5 Ferguson, Drew Thompson. *Beekeeping as Serious Leisure: A study of Hobbyist Beekeepers and the Social World of a Beekeeping Association*. June 2007. University of Guelph, Masters dissertation
- 6 Miralles, A., Raymond, M. & Lecointre, G. Empathy and compassion toward other species decrease with evolutionary divergence time. *Sci Rep* 9, 19555 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-56006-9>

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