Education through vocational programs provides an opportunity for those who are incarcerated to earn more than a certificate or degree; they can earn a second chance. Vocational programming empowers individuals by teaching marketable technical skills and a strong work ethic, which can be used after release. This, in fact, is one of the American Correctional Association’s many standards. And who better to teach work ethic than one of nature’s hardest-working insects? Ever heard the phrase, “Busy as a bee”? There’s a reason for it.

Bees — more than something to avoid at picnics

Honeybees pollinate an estimated 71 varieties of the 100 food crops on the planet. These food crops comprise a majority of the world’s food, an astounding 90 percent. Honeybees are not only directly responsible for pollinating the vast majority of fruits, nuts and vegetables that humans consume, but they also pollinate the grains and grasses used to feed beef and dairy cattle, goats, sheep and pigs. Thus, they indirectly provide the meat and dairy products much of the global population relies on. The economic value of honeybee pollination for agricultural crops within the U.S. was estimated at $19 billion in 2010. Another way to consider it is this: An average of one in every three bites of food is a result of pollination by honeybees. Honeybees have a lot of tasks to complete, and they tirelessly work hard each year to provide humans with goods and services that often are taken for granted. Furthermore,
humans often unintentionally harm natural honeybee populations, a habit that needs to stop.

Currently, scientists have linked several anthropogenic (i.e., originating with human activity) occurrences to declining bee populations, including global warming and loss of natural habitat. Additionally, indiscriminant pesticide use has arguably contributed to weakened immune systems in honeybees and may contribute to increased ectoparasite loads — such as the Varroa mite, a global nuisance for beekeepers. Clearly, the unintended consequences of human actions are becoming increasingly worrisome for this natural pollinator. Within the last decade, beekeepers have reported an average loss of 30 percent of honeybee colonies each winter in the U.S. Unfortunately, this problem is not limited to the states. Canadian and European beekeepers lost 29 percent and 20 percent of their colonies respectively during the 2012–2013 winter.

Since the 1940s, global honeybee populations have dropped by 50 percent. Losses of this magnitude are two times higher than what U.S. agro-economists consider economically tolerable. Although there may seem to be a lot of negativity, the future is bright for honeybees; one hopeful, second chance starts right here in the nation’s prison system.

Washington state’s efforts

Seeing as many prisons are getting more involved in landscaping, horticulture and gardening vocational programs, implementing beekeeping is a logical next
step. Facilities within Washington State have begun partnering with local beekeepers to support local honeybees, as well as to learn what works within the cool, wet climate of the Pacific Northwest. The Northwestern Joint Regional Correctional Facility (NWJRCF) and the 508th Military Police Detention Battalion of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, have partnered with Alan Woods of Woods Bee Company out of Centralia, Washington. Woods runs a very successful operation as he assists backyard beekeepers across several counties within the western part of the state. Furthermore, he runs his entire operation out of his garage and launched his business for only $500. Fueled by a passion for bees and a love of teaching, he serves as a great example of entrepreneurship and ingenuity for students within the prison vocational program at NWJRCF. Woods teaches prisoners, correctional officers and instructional staff the basics of beekeeping, as well as the tricks to having a successful hive in the Pacific Northwest. NWJRCF has attempted beekeeping over the last few years, but they lost their hives to a combination of predatory wasps, Varroa mites or unknown causes late in the fall seasons. Beekeeping is not an exact science, and experience is worth its weight in gold.

Local knowledge is vital for a successful beekeeping program, and the expertise that Woods provides, coupled with his extensive knowledge on beekeeping in Washington State, resulted in exceptionally healthy beehives at NWJRCF in the summer and fall of 2016. Since his arrival, Woods has taught NWJRCF the importance of entrance reducers to defend against predatory wasps, preventive mite treatments to increase overall hive health and combat the Varroa mite, and proper hive winterization techniques. Spirits were up, and expectations were high for successful overwintering as the NWJRCF and 508th Military Police Detention Battalion entered the 2016–2017 winter. As of January 2017, NWJRCF had two active Langstroth hives prepped for winter in its prison yard, with current plans to add an additional five Langstroth hives and two Warre hives in spring 2017.

As NWJRCF has learned, getting involved with local experts is not only a great way to learn what works in a particular location, but it’s also pivotal to developing proper beekeeping skills for inmates. The Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP), a partnership organization cofounded by the Washington State Department of Corrections and Evergreen State College, is taking this one step further. SPP and the Washington State Beekeepers Association will be hosting the Statewide Summit for Beekeeping in Prisons in March 2017. This summit will focus on bringing beekeepers and prisons together to share best practices and resources, build new partnerships,

The hive type that NWJRCF currently uses, Langstroth, was named after the designer of its original prototype, Rev. L.L. Langstroth, in 1852.

The other type of hive currently planned to be implemented at NWJRCF, Warre (pronounced “WAR-ray”), was also named after its designer, French monk Abbe Emile Warre.

Although many people believe honeybees originated in Africa, this type of bee is now found all over the world.
identify challenges and solutions, and plan future program development. Emily Passarelli, a graduate research assistant and green track coordinator at SPP, looks forward to the event. “We’re so excited to be hosting such an important event. We love having the opportunity to collaborate with local experts, work towards protecting struggling pollinators, and providing meaningful education to incarcerated individuals.” NWJRCF will be one of many institutions attending the summit in Washington State. Not only will active participation increase educational and training opportunities for inmates, but it will also further local bee conservation efforts.

Steps to take

A facility does not have to develop a full beekeeping program overnight to support local bee conservation efforts. Some facilities have more restraints than others and a full beekeeping program may not be practical. Nonetheless, they can still help with this green initiative. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides excellent resources for selecting flowering plants which attract honeybees and other pollinators to prison yards. Additionally, plants can be selected by height to meet the security standards of the particular facility they are grown in, as well as selected for climatic tolerance, depending on which part of the country the facility resides in. This allows flexibility across various custody levels as well as regional growing seasons. Furthermore, this type of plant selection and gardening can be done in small flower pots or window boxes, or it can be implemented into already existing horticulture and gardening programs. At the end of the day, the goal is to increase technical training for inmates.

Vocational and educational programs have been a part of corrections for some time now, but with the growing green and sustainability initiatives across government and industry alike, the opportunities to intersect the two are limitless. Vocational and educational programs have been a part of corrections for some time now, but with the growing green and sustainability initiatives across government and industry alike, the opportunities to intersect the two are limitless. As ensuring vocational programs offer prisoners training and technical skills is pivotal to making them marketable upon their release, it is important to keep in mind that some individuals may have a difficult time finding traditional jobs. Self-employment may be the best option for some, and the opportunity to learn from others who have successfully started backyard businesses may be more beneficial than a resume building class. Programs that focus on caring for the environment, such as beekeeping, also may have the added benefit of getting people committed to the betterment of not only themselves, but their entire community. Prisons hold neighbors of tomorrow. If they are successful, then everyone is successful. All it takes is a second chance or, as one could say, a new “bee”ginning.

ENDNOTES


3 Ibid.


5 Ibid.


7 Ibid.


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