

On the ethics of beekeeping

By Peter Armitage¹

There's a saying that when you're new to a culture, one quick way to learn its rules is to break them. This seems to apply to beekeeping. Some of our rules are codified in law, such as theft of hives, which is a property offence in the criminal code. However, many other rules are informal, and when violated in some way, are sanctioned by gossip, ostracism, social media exposé, or some other informal method of social control. We can find out what's right or wrong in our beekeeping community by breaking some rule that is otherwise invisible to us, and unspoken. But is this the best way forward?

Here in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), we are an extremely young group of beekeepers, having grown in number from six in 2010 to over one hundred today. Keeping our bees alive throughout the year is our first big challenge, and it's a steep learning curve for many of us. Early on we learn who our beekeeping neighbours are, and we often seek help with many practical concerns using social media, mentorships, and other relationships. These forms of communication and mutual support are the bricks and mortar of a beekeeping community. However, in building this community, we have little clear understanding of how we are to behave towards one another and society at large — as beekeepers. What constitutes normative behaviour for us beeks; behaviours that we can agree upon as correct, proper, ethical?

This is one of the questions I'm tackling in an upcoming article on beekeeping ethics for a Mainland beekeeping magazine. In doing my homework for this article, I've canvassed beekeepers on the BEE-L listserver, through private email correspondence, and rooted about in the apicultural literature (e.g., Ellis 1990a, 1990b; McCutcheon 2013; McRory 2015; Wenning 2001a, 2001b; and Whitaker 2018). I recognize that like many if not most matters related to ethics, there's no black and white solutions to many ethical dilemmas, and we must be careful not to rush to judgement. I intend to consult an ethicist as I go forward with this project because ethicists have useful methodologies for the consideration of ethical dilemmas. Some examples of ethical questions (dilemmas?) related to beekeeping are:

1. Is it ethical for a beekeeper to breach a legal quarantine and introduce a pathogen or pest to a honey bee stock that was previously free of them? Here, the law has encoded the ethics more or less; the law says it's wrong and you will be negatively sanctioned if you breach a legal quarantine.

¹ This article first appeared in Vol. 5, Issue 1, of *The Buzz from Here*. I wish to thank my correspondents and BEE-L contributors for their responses to my questions regarding ethics. All errors of fact and omission are entirely my responsibility. Thanks to Declan Rankin Jardin (Alveole) for information concerning apiary locations in downtown Montreal.

However, what about cases where ethics (normative behaviours) may not be encoded in law?

2. Is it ethical for a migratory beekeeper to overwinter 200 colonies immediately adjacent to an existing apiary owned by a local beekeeper without permission or even consultation? It's legal, but is it ethical?

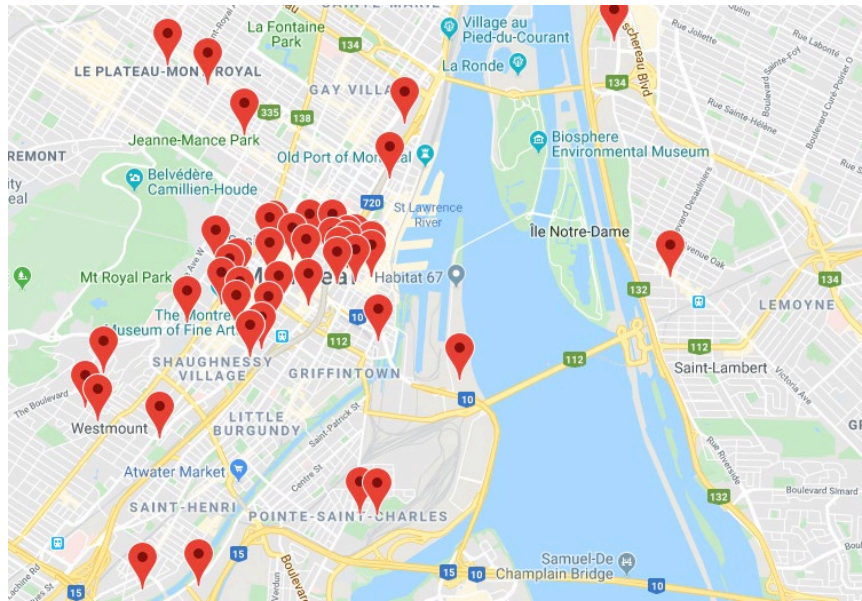
3. Is it ethical for urban beekeepers not to manage their colonies properly with respect to swarming, or not to place bait hives in their neighbourhood to catch swarms? Mismanagement is legal, but is it ethical considering the public nuisance and damage to the reputation of apiculture posed by swarms?

4. Is it ethical for a board member of a beekeeping club or association to hog swarm collection to the exclusion of other swarm catchers in the community, especially when the club or association is the first-stop for the reporting of swarms by the public?

And then there's environmental ethics.

5. Is it ethical for beekeepers to wilfully introduce exotic, highly invasive floral species to a region without regard for the negative consequences for existing plant communities, the various species dependent upon these communities, and the social-economic costs related to weed management, etc.?

A number of these issues may be more acute in areas densely populated with beekeepers and hence honey bee colonies such as urban centres, or even rural regions where large commercial operators come into contact with established, local beekeepers. In fact, the intensity and frequency of beekeeper allegations of unethical behaviour and conflict may correlate directly with the density of apicultural operations. Urban beekeeper density may also heighten the ethical requirements related to social responsibility (e.g., nuisance, public safety). Map 1 illustrates the potential for ethical challenges in an urban setting; it depicts 50-60 Alveole hives within a 3 km radius of the Oceanex terminal in downtown Montreal. Alveole operates a rent-a-hive business with approximately 400 hives on the Island of Montreal.



Map 1. Alveole hives <3 km radius of the Oceanex terminal in Montreal (map courtesy Declan Rankin Jardin, Alveole)

To help organize my thoughts about apicultural ethics, I've created a matrix of issues raised by other beekeepers and found in the beekeeping literature. Not all of them apply to NL, especially those related to large-scale, migratory beekeeping. I have classified the issues according to whether they apply primarily to apiculture (apiculture-impact ethics), our relations with other beekeepers and the public at large (human-impact ethics), or have consequences for the non-human environment (ecological impact ethics).

If you can think of other ethical issues not included in this matrix, please give me a shout. Also, I'm interested to hear what you think about these issues. This is a work in progress, so you can expect my thinking to evolve on this complex topic, especially once I bring an ethicist on board.

Issue	Apiculture-impact ethics	Human-impact ethics	Ecological-impact ethics	Comments
1. Beekeeping husbandry related ethics				
1.1. Responsible husbandry	●	●	●	General statement re. need for proper management and care of colonies
1.2 Treatment free re. varroa mites	●	●	●	Beekeepers who create "Varroa bombs" & infest neighbours
1.3 Proper management of colony health & biosecurity	●	●	●	Beekeepers who mismanage and make their bees sick or spread pathogens & pests to neighbours

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2. Animal welfare				
2.1 Beekeeping practices amount to “cruelty to animals”		●		Beekeepers kill & confine bees unnaturally, in principle managing non-human species
2.2 Beekeeper pest control amounts to “cruelty to animals” or is ecologically irresponsible		●	●	Beekeepers who unnecessarily kill bears rather than employ electric fences; use of insecticides, poisons to kill wasps, skunks, etc.
3. Environmental responsibility				
3.1 Beekeeper assisted impacts on non-Apis pollinators (forage competition, etc.)	●		●	Too many honey bees competing with non-Apis species for forage
3.2 Beekeeper assisted spread of exotic species	●		●	Honey bees spill viruses to non-Apis species, spread of exotic plants
3.3 Guerilla seed bombing of parks, urban areas to improve honey yields		●	●	Seeding public or private property without permission, spread of invasive or exotic species
4. Relations with other beekeepers				
4.1 Swarm collection etiquette	●	●		Beekeepers not notifying possible owners of swarms before capturing them, or bee club/association board members & other strategically placed persons hogging swarms for themselves to the exclusion of other swarm catchers
4.2 Undermining a breeding program	●	●		Moving “exotic” stock into an area where there is a breeding program
4.3 Wilful introduction of undesirable genetics	●	●		Intentional introduction of Africanized genetics to local stock through legal importation
4.4 Failure to participate in community-wide health monitoring, treatment & biosecurity programs	●	●		Re. community-wide oxalic acid treatments to reduce varroa mite loads across the neighbourhood or region
4.5 Civic duty in relation to the apicultural community	●	●		Re. contributing to the collectivity through association membership, etc.

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4.6 Wilful breach of quarantine	●	●	●	Transporting bees (& their pests and pathogens) across quarantine boundaries
4.7 Illegal importation	●	●	●	Transporting bees across borders and thereby importing exotic pests & pathogens
4.8 Encroachment into existing apiary zones	●	●		Overstocking available forage and damaging honey production of existing beekeepers
4.9 Stealing hives		●		Property theft
4.10 Apicultural research programs that fail to consult affected beekeepers		●		Inadequate ethics protocols re. consulting local beekeepers where there is high risk of pathogen/pest spillover from research to local stock
4.11 Questionable business practices		●		
4.11.1 Non-local beekeepers muscling in on local pollination contracts	●	●		Undercutting existing beekeepers so as to get their pollination contracts
4.11.2 Commercial beekeepers cheating customers re. pollination services	●	●		Not providing sufficiently large colonies to do the pollination job
4.11.3 Beekeepers undercutting honey prices		●		Exerting downward pressure on honey prices
4.11.4 Conflict of interest: beekeepers who are inspectors abusing their positions for self-interest		●		Government bee inspectors gathering intelligence on good forage locations & locating their own apiaries there
4.11.5 Conflict of interest: commercial beekeepers who are association board members pushing commercial interests in conflict with hobbyists		●		Association/club board members adopting policies that favour commercial, migratory beekeeping even though this facilitates spread of exotic pests & pathogens & hurts other beekeepers

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4.11.6 Conflict of interest: hobby beekeepers who are association board members pushing hobby interests in conflict with commercials		●		hobbyists in some jurisdictions have “hijacked” beekeeping organizations with agendas that are not supported by evidence, thus driving commercials out of the organizations
4.11.7 Vendors mis-representing stock qualities	●	●		Vendors claiming their bees are “mite resistant” or “superior” without supporting evidence
4.11.8 Vendors mis-representing honey source	●	●		Vendors importing honey and claiming it is local
4.11.9 Vendors failing to test for diseases & pests prior to sale	●	●	●	Vendors are a potential pathway for spread of pests, pathogens & diseases
5. Social responsibility (consumer protection, nuisance, etc.)				
5.1 Creating a nuisance to neighbours and endangering public safety	●	●		Excessive sting hazard, swarms onto neighbour’s property, importing Africanized genetics
5.2 Honey bee stock trespass on private property		●		Honey bee stock foraging on private lands without the permission of the owners
5.3 Charging for swarm captures & cut-outs		●		Charging citizens for swarm captures & cutouts when the problem was created by neighbouring beekeepers
5.4 Honey quality & authenticity				
5.4.1 Mislabelling of honey as to floral source, country of origin, organics		●		Misrepresentation of contents, damage to product integrity & consumer confidence
5.4.2 Adulterated honey with rice syrup, etc.		●		Misrepresentation of contents, undercutting local beekeepers, damage to product integrity & consumer confidence
5.4.3 Consumer health: keeping honey free of contaminants		●		Unhygienic honey houses, extraction methods, etc., damage to product integrity & consumer confidence

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