

Exploring the buzz about bees' demise

By Peter Keough
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

You hear that sound?" asks John Miller, the owner of a big honey corporation, who is one of the subjects of Markus Imhoof's inventive and powerful documentary, "More Than Honey." Miller is standing in a sea of blossoming almond trees abuzz with millions of bees. "That's the sound of money."

It is also, as the film makes clear, a sound with a precarious future. Descended from a family of beekeepers, Imhoof was disturbed by media reports of a mysterious plague wiping out bee populations. He decided to find out what was going on. After all, as he points out, more than a third of our food supply owes its existence to bee pollination.

His search takes him around the world, from the mass production of honey in California to the last refuge of a strain of healthy bees on an island off the coast of Australia. Curiously, his subjects' attitudes toward bees reflect stereotypes about their own nationalities and cultures.

The German-Swiss beekeeper Fred Jaggi, for example, whose hives are in a pristine Alpine valley, talks disturbingly of maintaining the "racial purity" of his bees and chases away a "foreign" interloper (marked with a yellow dye) from a rival beekeeper's hives. When he discovers that one of his queens has mated with an alien drone, he pertinaciously beheads her. But his belief in the supremacy of his eugenically superior bees proves unwise, as the incestuous gene pool leaves them susceptible to the disease "foulbrood."

The hippie-ish Fred Terry from Arizona, on the other hand, sees the bee population crisis in terms of our national phobia about illegal aliens. Case in point — the "invasion" of African killer bees. The media hysteria notwithstanding, these wild insects may be the salvation of the species, as they are hardier and produce honey under the harshest circumstances. Terry casually bags a huge nest of the



PHOTOS BY KINO LOBBI

"More Than Honey" visits beekeepers all over the world, including Australia (above), and features close-ups of bees at work.



MOVIE REVIEW

MORE THAN HONEY

Directed by: Markus Imhoof

Written by: Imhoof and Kerstin Hoppenhaus

Starring: Fred Jaggi, Randolph Menzel, Fred Terry, John Miller

At: Kendall Square

Running time: 95 minutes

Unrated (graphic pollination, brutal execution of a queen bee)
In English, German, Swiss German, and Mandarin, with subtitles

vicious stingers roosting under a neighbor's roof and relocates them to a hive on his property. Unfortunately, they all fly away, finding their new home in an inaccessible crevice in a cliff. They may be feral, but they aren't fools.

Starkest of all is the situation in China. Long ago, Imhoof notes in voice-over, Mao decreed that all sparrows be put to death for stealing the peasants' grain. Billions were slain, resulting in a plague of the insects the sparrows feasted on. The Chinese authorities then applied insecticides, which also killed the bees. In some regions none has survived, and so armies of human laborers swarm over the fields, pollinating the crops by hand.

Though overloaded with narration, "Honey" triumphs visually, with stunning shots of bees in flight, tracked in slow motion, "Winged Migration" style, by who-knows-what technical wizardry. It also resembles "Leviathan" — the recent, poetic docu-

mentary about another rapacious institution, the fishing industry — with its extreme close-ups of bees at work and the interiors of hives shimmering with an uncanny, abstract beauty.

That less mercenary aspect of the trade is not lost on Miller, the latest in a long line of beekeepers, and a self-proclaimed, reluctant capitalist. He looks wistfully at the brutal harvesting and processing of his product. Huge machines slash away at the honeycomb, along with scores of indignant bees. "My grandfather would probably be disturbed if he saw how we kept bees today," he says. "He'd say 'you've lost your soul!'"

Sometimes granddad knows best. Bees mean more than honey, and certainly more than money. They're part of the global ecosystem that globalism puts at risk.

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