

POLITICS

Bees Are Slowly Going Extinct. These Prisoners Are Trying To Stop That.

The program the Washington State Department of Corrections is rolling out is proving good for bees, and inmates too.

By Dominique Mosbergen

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The Washington Department of Corrections has rolled out a robust beekeeping program in seven of its 12 state prisons. Here, 10 beekeeping students at the Washington State Penitentiary learn the ropes from a volunteer professional beekeeper.

Just inside the barbed wire border of Airway Heights Corrections Center, four nondescript white boxes fat with honey and thousands of bees are being tended to by men society might misjudge as being anything but tender.

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Charles Roark is one of these men. He's serving a 26-year sentence at the Spokane County facility in Washington state for first-degree assault and unlawful possession of a weapon — and honeybees are his new obsession.

Hours before The Huffington Post spoke with him by phone on a Friday afternoon in late March, Roark had gathered with 16 other inmates to chat all things apiculture at the monthly meeting of the prison's bee club. Roark is the editor-in-chief of the club's bee newsletter. He said the club is now planning a honey judging contest. It was his idea, he proudly noted.

Roark, 37, said the venture started out as a "fun, cool hobby." "But it's not something you just do. It consumes you, it becomes a part of you," he said in hushed tones from a room where several prison staff were present. "I see the bees as being my children."



A beekeeping program sponsor at Cedar Creek Corrections Center in Littlerock, Washington, shows off some healthy honeybees. Photo: Sadie Gilliom.

He's one of more than 50 inmates at seven prisons in the state of Washington who are engaged in an ambitious and newly revamped beekeeping program that the Washington State Department of Corrections has rolled out. About 30 hives, each containing around 60,000 honeybees, are being cared for by inmates at these facilities, all of whom are undergoing

training to help them become journeyman-level beekeepers; perhaps even master beekeepers one day.

The relationship between inmates and bees is a symbiotic one, according to program participants and prison staff. For the incarcerated participants, the project is equipping them with skills that could prove useful beyond the prison's four walls. They say the bees have also imbued them with a sense of purpose and meaning — which, the correction department says, has in turn helped make the prisons safer.

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As for the bees, they're benefiting too. Colony collapse threatens honeybee populations across the state and nationwide, and the prison program is touted as a service that could go a long way to protecting Washington's pollinators. If replicated elsewhere, it could have wide-ranging ecological impacts across the nation.

'A second chance'

Roark's relationship with bees had begun with trauma. He remembers being rushed to the hospital as a child after developing a severe allergic reaction to a bee sting.

After a battery of tests, he learned that he was not allergic to some types of bees including honeybees — but for decades, he kept a wide berth anyway. "A bee was a bee and I was scared of them," he said. "I'd been taught to avoid them."

But about a year ago, when Roark saw flyers around Airway Heights advertising the launch of a "groundbreaking" beekeeping program, he was immediately intrigued. Describing himself as a "country boy" who'd grown up in a rural corner of the state and who'd been raised in the great outdoors, Roark said he saw it as a rare opportunity while incarcerated to "get back to my roots, to be around nature again and experience that enjoyment."

After more than three decades of avoiding bees, "I was given a second chance," Roark said — and in more ways than one.

Roark is by all accounts a model inmate. Incarcerated in 1998, he's been an active participant of several prison programs, including the Redemption Project and the Sustainability in Prisons Project, an initiative that the corrections department and Washington's Evergreen State College run jointly. Described as an "astonishing" and exemplary prisoner by Airway Heights staff, Roark has also taken on a leadership role in some of these programs, including the environmental literacy initiative Roots of Success, for which he is a facilitator. He's also written a book about recovery and addiction, volunteered in the Airway Heights quilting project and has made teddy bears for charity.

Explaining his commitment to these programs, Roark said he's just planning for the future.

"I worry about re-entry," he said, "about how to reintegrate myself back into society." Roark's slated release date is in 2024. But in all his efforts to better himself and to improve his future prospects, he said his experience with the bees has been something special.

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In November, after six months of lectures and mentorship under a master beekeeper from a state beekeeping association, Roark was certified as a beekeeping apprentice. He has since embarked on the next chapter of his bee journey — training for journeyman-level certification, which will take three more years of rigorous academic learning, hands-on experience and several written and practical tests.

“I really cherish the experience of being able to do this,” he said last month. “A program of this magnitude is kind of rare in a correctional setting.”

Here is a copy of the latest Airway Heights bee club newsletter, written by Charles Roark

THE BUZZ AROUND AIRWAY HEIGHTS!

2016 was a great year for the WEST PLAINS BEEKEEPER ASSOCIATION, as it linked up with the WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS and established a common ground: the ability to teach and a desire to learn.

Four hives of CARNIOLAN HONEY BEES were strategically positioned within the AHCC to boost pollination and crop cultivation throughout the facility's gardens. Based on the amount of produce harvested, the hives brought great success.

A large amount of the produce is donated annually to local food banks, charitable organizations and schools as a way to help feed and give back to the community. The majority of produce is made available to the AHCC kitchens, where inmate residents enjoy the opportunity to savor the sweet flavor of fresh home grown fruits and vegetables.

As a benefit to the facility's inmate population, an introductory beekeeping course was taught to a select group of 18 inmates, instructed by master beekeeper Mr. Jim Miller of the *West Plains Beekeeper Association*. The class graduated and became certified apprentice beekeepers, only after successfully completing 12 sessions and passing the required examination.

The correctional facility has been working with Mr. Miller to develop a fully self-sustainable certification program over the next three years. The goal is to have certified inmates facilitate classes for their peers. Through in-depth study and classroom learning, potential inmate facilitators will give presentations on what they have learned and become more comfortable with public speaking. There will also be opportunities for hands-on experience working with the hives and possibly a spot in the upcoming queen-rearing program to raise queen bees for Eastern Washington University.

Through the *West Plains Beekeepers Association*, a non-profit corporation in Washington State, the correctional facility has established an official beekeeping club, including co-chairs, duties and by-laws. The club has been created to give the program substance and allow inmates to have added responsibility while gaining real life experience in developing community and leadership skills. The club will also help to spread the knowledge of beekeeping and the importance of bees to our ecosystem and way of life. Club members actively work to earn points towards the journeyman level on a pathway to becoming a master beekeeper. There are several ways points can be earned, for example, delivering verbal presentations, facilitating beekeeping classes, and by contributing articles for the club newsletter or other publications. This program is really the first of its kind for the Department of Corrections. It is not common that Washington state inmates are able to release with any kind of apprentice level training, as part of Washington State's Sustainability in Prisons Project, all parties involved consider this program to be a huge success.

Interest in beekeeping and sustainability programs throughout the facility has soared and some even envision a career as a beekeeper. Most are excited for the opportunity to learn, and possibly become certified. Staff and inmate students/apprentices will journey onwards sharing their knowledge and experience and quite possibly a lifelong passion as a beekeeper.

Article by Charles Roark #784876



Saving the bees

Beekeeping itself is not unusual in American prisons. Several states including Oregon, South Carolina, Nebraska, Texas and Maryland have some kind of beekeeping program in at least one of their correctional facilities. In Georgia, five out of 33 state prisons run beekeeping programs, which Georgia's Department of Corrections said have produced 57 certified beekeepers to date. In neighboring Florida, two correctional institutions have beekeeping training programs. A spokesperson from the state's corrections department said over 135 inmates have participated in the initiative since it launched in 2011.

But over in Washington, loftier goals are being stoked.



Assistant Secretary for Washington Corrections and co-director for SPP Steve Sinclair, center, checks on the bees at Washington State Penitentiary. Photo: WA Corrections

Sustainability in Prisons Project co-director Steve Sinclair, the assistant secretary of prisons at the Washington Department of Corrections, said the goal is to eventually introduce beekeeping programs to all 12 of Washington's state prisons and expand the initiative so many more inmates can participate and rear additional numbers of honeybees.

As the program, which falls under the umbrella of the sustainability project, grows and becomes more robust, Sinclair said he envisions the prisons becoming community apiculture hubs. In these centers, incarcerated program participants can conduct in-depth research into beekeeping, and members of the public can visit to learn about beekeeping and pollinator conservation from inmates with expertise in this area.

In these ways, Sinclair said he hopes the state's prisons might come to play an important role in helping to protect Washington's honeybees and other pollinators — a goal that had propelled the program's revamping in the first place.

Beekeeping, in some form or other, has been an active program in the state's prisons for about a decade, said Sinclair. But for years, it had been a modest enterprise at best, with few resources devoted to it and no option for inmates to attain certification above an apprentice level.

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But in 2015, there was a dramatic shift in vision following a troubling conversation Sinclair had with a colleague.

“I was talking to a staff member [at a sustainability event] when the subject of bees was raised,” Sinclair told HuffPost over the phone last month. “I was told that there had been a 40 percent decline in bee colonies nationwide over the past two years, and I was amazed. I said, with the human capacity we have in prisons, we could put that to work building healthy hives and getting [those honeybees] back into the community.”

The corrections department, with the support of Evergreen State College, a liberal arts school in Olympia, consequently reached out to beekeeping organizations to make plans to beef up the prisons’ beekeeping efforts. Groups like the Washington State Beekeepers Association are now partnering closely with the department to help develop a comprehensive — and eventually self-sustaining — beekeepers certification program for the state’s corrections facilities, along with plans to help the prisons achieve their longer-term conservation aims.

Gary Clueit, the president of WASBA, sees a lot of potential for the prisons’ bee program. In Washington, beekeepers have been witnessing a “massive loss of bees” in recent years, he said. Rates of colony loss total up to 35 to 45 percent annually in the state, significantly higher than the national average. Destruction of habitat, pesticides and other chemicals, as well as viruses and parasites are some of the threats facing bee populations in the state.

With these plummeting numbers, bee programs like the ones that Roark and other inmates are engaged in are more important than ever, said Clueit. “There are many advantages of the prison program,” he said. “For one, it’s expanding the number of people who are knowledgeable about bees. The inmates seem to have more time to really focus on learning about them. In fact, the test scores we’re seeing from inmates are consistently higher than the general population. It’s encouraging.”

Raising queens, protecting pollinators

But beyond the cultivation of more beekeepers and more honeybees, Clueit said the prisons are in a unique position to help the state’s pollinators in two other specific ways.

First, Clueit sees a real opportunity for native pollinator conservation efforts. Honeybees, he explained, aren’t native to the U.S. European settlers imported them to the Americas. They’re the insects that are used to pollinate many of our crop plants (such as in California, where billions of honeybees are brought every year to pollinate almond trees in the biggest single

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pollination event on Earth). But for most of the other plants out there, it's the native pollinators — the bumble bees and wasps, butterflies and solitary bees — that are doing all the work.



An incarcerated beekeeper at Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Aberdeen, Washington, checks honeybee frames. Photo: Shauna Bittle

Unfortunately, these native pollinators face most of the same threats that the honeybees do, and they're declining at similarly troubling rates. The problem is, unlike honeybees — which, thanks to their use in crop pollination and byproducts like honey and beeswax, are considered economically valuable — native pollinators are not

seen in the same light, Clueit said. "Honeybees are the only pollinators we seem to care about and there are no money or resources being put aside for native pollinators" he added.

But in the prisons, this lack of economic incentive does not apply. "They're not allowed to make a profit," said Clueit, "so they could be doing some basic groundwork in these areas."

For the same reason, the WASBA president explained, prisons could become perfect breeding grounds for honeybee queens, which are time-consuming and challenging to raise — especially at a larger scale. In Washington, "very, very few people are raising queens" of a good quality at a commercial level, said Clueit, and that may be precipitating the mass bee deaths.

"One of the problems with the Washington bee population is genetics," he said. "Almost all beekeepers here get their queens from out of state — California primarily, and Hawaii, Georgia and Florida too. The problem is, if they're coming from these states, they're coming from a different climate and there's pretty good evidence that locally-raised queens do much better in terms of resistance to [parasites] and viruses."

And that's where the prison system could come in.

"They could help us produce local queens," Clueit said. "And sell it to local beekeepers just to recover costs. It's the perfect environment for a nonprofit exercise [like this]."

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Raising queens is already something being discussed at Airway Heights. Roark said the idea has ignited his imagination.

When he's released, he's considering rearing queen honeybees for a living. "There are basically no companies in Washington doing this so I would be the man," Roark said. "I don't think I could keep with the demand."

Making lemonade

While pulling out slices of honeycomb from the beehives set up at Washington's Corrections Center for Women, Candace Ralston, who's serving a four-year sentence at the facility, spoke of her aspirations.

"Somewhere along the way I lost my integrity and [my family] paid for it," the mother of three told KOMO News in March. "The only thing I can I can do here is learn to be a better, and to deal with the stuff that got me here, and to show them you can make lemonade out of lemons."

Her lemonade, Ralston said, might just be beekeeping — a vocation she's considering after her release in two years. Ralston is one of eight inmates at the facility undergoing beekeeper training.

Finding a job after prison is a critical part of the beekeeping program, said Sinclair of the Washington Department of Corrections. With a beekeeper certification in their name, program participants could be eligible for jobs not just in apiculture but also horticulture and agriculture, among other industries.

But it's not just the inmates' future that's being secured. Initiatives like the beekeeping project are actively helping to make Washington's prisons safer, according to Sinclair and others involved in the program.

"I've found in my experience, when people can give back to the community and do something good, they get very engaged," Sinclair said. And with that engagement comes less idle time and in turn less likelihood for trouble.

Plus, as Roark explained, it's a carrot-and-stick situation too.

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“When we signed up for the program, we had to sign a behavioral contract. so if you get in trouble or you get in a fight, you’re out of the program,” Roark said. “When you have something to lose, you tend to make better decisions.”

Sinclair, who has worked in the Department of Corrections for almost three decades, said he’s watched how violence has declined in the prison system over the years — a drop he credits to programs like the beekeeping initiative.

It’s all working so well in fact that other prison systems, like the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, are considering emulating Washington’s beekeeping model.

“That’s the whole other side of the country,” said Roark of the Massachusetts news, which had been discussed that morning at the bee club meeting. “I’m absolutely proud and so astonished.”

“I want to give back to society, to leave my footprint,” he added of his continued commitment to the program. “Bees are a wonderful way to do that.”

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