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## Plight of France's honey bee

By John Laursen  
Pertuis, Provence

**In a normal summer, Provence is full of fields of blue lavender and the air is a-buzz with bees.**

But this year's heatwave has left the lavender - along with the thyme, rosemary and pink heather - shrivelled to nothing.



Honey making in the region has been hit hard by heatwaves

Patrick Molle, a beekeeper based near the village of Pertuis not far from Aix-en-Provence, says he usually brings about 400 hives to the lavender fields but this year only 40 made honey.

"That won't pay for much more than the cost of moving the hives up there," he says. "It's a disastrous year."

Provence is the hardest hit region of France but this has been a bad year for almost every one of France's 80,000 beekeepers.

Honey production from their 1.3 million hives is down by more than half with hungry bees forced to eat sugary preparations laid out by the beekeepers in order to survive.

### High bee mortality

And even before the drought, French bees were on their knees.

Until recently, the normal death rate for bees during the winter months was one in 10.

Now, says Vincent Clair of the French National Bee Surveillance Unit, the death rate is six in 10.



The death rate for bees rose to six in 10

New swarms have to be replaced more and more often.

Opinions are divided about the causes of the rise in bee mortality.

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"The most likely theory today is that the massive use of pesticides is weakening the colonies so they are becoming more vulnerable to big infections such as [the *Varroa destructor* mite] and viruses," says Mr Clair.

### Playing God

But others say beekeepers themselves are partly to blame.

Roland Douai is one of two beekeepers who sell their honey on the street market of Aix-en-Provence.



Many local beekeepers have been struggling this year

He says that in the past, all beekeepers kept local species of bee which were well-adapted to the area.

"But encouraged by so-called scientists and other modernisers, some beekeepers have been importing bees from all over the world, crossing them with local bees... playing the sorcerer's apprentice... in order to increase their honey production," Mr Douai says.

"It's upset the natural balance and now we're paying the price."

### Napoleon's favourite

The plight of the bee is a sorry tale for those who love honey, who care about the countryside and, of course, those whose livelihoods depend on it.

But here in France it's also a question of history.

The decline of the French bee would have infuriated Napoleon Bonaparte who made the insect a symbol of his reign.



Bees were adored by Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon liked bees because they work in an orderly and selfless fashion for the benefit of an undisputed leader.

Scientists at the time didn't know that what they took to be a king bee was in fact a queen.

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