

Patterson's Page

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Back from his recent trip to Apimondia Roger Patterson reflects upon his experience there and on communication in beekeeping in general.

The first Patterson's Page appeared in 2012. It was intended to be an occasional feature that questioned established thinking and looked at how beekeeping operates, encouraging beekeepers to think what bees might do in response to their actions and not humanise bees. It could also be a fill-in to help the Editor if another article was withdrawn at short notice!

I believe in being open and available in case someone has an issue or needs clarification on what I have written, which is why I am happy to have my email address displayed. It works because after publication I often get responses from readers; all so far being positive and agreeing with what I wrote. I guess the Editor may have correspondence from those who disagree. After the article I wrote about queens escaping from clip catchers I had several emails, including one from a Devon beekeeper who had just written about the same problem with that type of clip catcher for the Devon magazine *Beekeeping*.

I normally confine each article to one topic, but I thought I would mention several in this one – a sort of 'snippets', raising issues that may not often get aired, but that are all part of beekeeping.

I recently attended Apimondia in Montreal. It was my first visit and overall I thoroughly enjoyed myself. The organisers were the Canadian Honey Council. As one of the 5,600 visitors I think they did a brilliant job. Their folk all wore yellow shirts, so they were easy to identify and whatever question one had was immediately answered. They were incredibly well drilled and very friendly. I did not see one person frustrated because they could not get an answer to a question. The perceived success of an event, whatever the size, often depends on those who are seen as being official, such as stewards. How often do you see them at events when they do not have a clue what they are doing and are sometimes officious and unpleasant?

Large events are great for chatting to people you have not seen before and may never see again. As a fairly experienced beekeeper, the first person I spoke to was a beginner from Trinidad which immediately raised an issue that often is not considered by organisers, perhaps not of Apimondia, but more generally. Events of a general nature need to satisfy the attendees. Perhaps event organisers, yes, even those at local BKA level, should think a little more about their events. Should we not try to arrange things specifically for newer beekeepers, where the presenters are asked to pitch their presentation at a relevant level? Something like making products with beeswax will suit anyone, even non-beekeepers, but there is little point in speaking to beginners about a swarm control method if they do not know the life cycles or what happens in a hive when it is preparing to swarm.

That of course raises yet another question. What is a beginner? I have come across several who have kept bees for 10–20 years and do not know these two important points. One beekeeper of eight

years did not know there were two cell sizes, worker and drone, another of five years beekeeping thought that 'robbing' meant hive theft! I would normally put beekeepers with this amount of practical experience in the intermediate or advanced group. Perhaps we should have a category of 'Perpetual Beginner'.

When I am asked to speak, I am rarely told the experience of the audience. Within a few minutes I can generally tell their experience by body language, so if I detect there are several beginners, I usually explain things in a more basic way. This often adds ten minutes, but I consider I am there to give information.

Within an hour of arriving at Apimondia an Australian couple said: "Hello Roger", but I did not recognise them. They took over the organising of their teaching apiary in Australia with no guidance, so looked online for ideas. They consulted Dave Cushman's website and found the website of Wisborough Green BKA. They regularly read our newsletters and others for ideas and had recognised me from the various photos online. This immediately showed me one of the great benefits of the internet, where beekeepers from the other side of the world can help each other and where very often things like newsletters that are hidden can reveal some real gems. If you have a few hours free over the winter, why not have a bit of a search. You will be surprised at what you can find.

I raised an issue of availability, which brings me onto something else. Recently I wanted to publicise a couple of one-day events run by Wisborough Green BKA to help beekeepers. I tried to find email addresses for the BKAs within a couple of hours driving to send information to. I found it incredibly difficult and spent ten hours trying. Why is it that many BKAs make it so difficult to contact them? Many now just have an 'email us' facility, but no name. The problem with that though, is the sender does not know what has happened if there is no response. It may be there is only one person who receives messages and they decide if information gets through to the right person. If someone was thinking of starting beekeeping, they are usually keen. If they do not get a response from the BKA, they may start on their own. Then who moans about all the beekeepers who do not join a BKA? I suspect the reason for hiding is concern about the amount of junk mail received. At Wisborough Green all our officers can be emailed direct from the website and we have not had many problems.

Finally, there are some CDs of old beekeeping books available on eBay at a very reasonable price. It is amazing how much some of these old beekeepers knew; although of course there have been more recent discoveries, so allowances will have to be made. Some of the practical beekeeping was very sound and still relevant today. I think these are a good buy for the beekeeper who can sift out information that may not be seen in modern books. I cannot advertise, but look for the seller 'TTG'!