Beekeeping as a Therapy for Individuals with Mental Disability

Andrej Sever
At last year’s Apimondia the Slovenia Beekeepers Association presented this report on the work which the beekeepers from Bela Krajina have carried out over the last year and a half.

In 2013 Slovenian beekeepers celebrated 140 years of successful work and the 240th anniversary of world renowned teacher of beekeeping Anton Janša. The idea reported here is just one piece in the mosaic of the work done by Slovenian beekeepers over last 140 years.

The idea of introducing beekeeping as a therapy for the residents in the social welfare centre at Črnomelj appeared after working as a volunteer for many years at the centre as well as with the pupils and teachers from the local primary school. Being in contact with the pupils, observing their progress when developing their manual skills while being engaged in fine arts and sport activities, inspired me to do something more.

In Slovenia children with special needs are oriented to take part in different educational programmes on the basis of a diagnosis and opinions of experts (a paediatrician, a psychologist, a dialectologist, a social worker, a psychiatrist). People with moderate disabilities are usually educated according to special programmes of education and training. Most adult mentally disabled people in Slovenia enter a social welfare centre after finishing their education. The social welfare centre Črnomelj (later referred to as SWC) is a public centre which offers the services of social welfare, guidance and occupation under special conditions as well as daylong care for the mentally and physically disabled. In 2012 there were 47 residents from Bela Krajina in the centre.

As a beekeeper and a member of the Managerial Committee of the Slovene Beekeeping Association I decided to present the idea of beekeeping as therapy to the managerial body of the BKA of Bela Krajina as well as the management of the SWC Črnomelj, who accepted it readily.

Slovene beekeeping differs from other beekeeping around the world. In Slovenia beekeeping presents a beekeeper’s way of life and it is also a way of life of the people surrounding them. When a Slovene beekeeper enters his apiary he becomes a part of nature, lives and breathes with it and is grateful for the gifts he receives from it.

In March 2012 we started looking for people who would be suitable to experience the world of beekeeping. When choosing potential members of the beekeeping club we had to consider:
- parents’ opinions,
- the degree of mental and physical disability,
- if there was an interest in learning about beekeeping,
- comprehension capabilities (what bees are, what their role in in nature),
- their health conditions (allergies to venom and beehive products),
- their motor capabilities to take part in taking care of and feeding bees, or extracting honey.

When organising the club we took into consideration if a resident’s occupational level is intensified or diminished by being involved as well as the fact of how important and demanding beekeeper’s work is during a beekeeping season.

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Fig. 1. Map of Slovenia showing the region in which this social project is based.
At the beginning of the project the residents visited a beekeeper, talked to him and opened a hive. Then they started performing some basic tasks, such as making frames and recognising basic tools (hammer, nails, tongs, stands, wires). The lack of manual skills and the inability to perform some tasks as well as use the tools and instruments made it necessary to repeat individual procedures patiently many times. It is very interesting: but it became apparent that adults with moderate mental disabilities are able to perform some tasks better than people without disability and who had well practised manual skills.

Beekeeping was linked to other leisure activities in the SWC, such as: “Fine arts creation”, “Horticulture club” and “Household- housekeeping club”. It was beekeeping that connected the different clubs in a new, dynamic, ecological and artistic way. At the beginning fine arts creation was directed towards the world of bees. Since the SWC residents mainly used motifs from bee life and our cultural heritage when drawing. They applied what they had learned to painting beehive fronts. It turned out that in this way their knowledge of bees improved even more. The most beautiful beehive fronts have been used by the BKAs of Črnomelj and Bela Krajina, as well as the centre itself, for gifts and presents. Immediately after the very first extraction the residents used their first honey to make honey cakes and warm drinks, as well as becoming familiar with the importance of bee products for health.

At the beginning beekeeping was meant to present one extra leisure activity in the SWC. Eventually, it turned out that beekeeping did not mean just filling up the residents’ free time but also a new form of work as well as providing a companionable activity. After more than a year and a half of implementing beekeeping we can confirm that it presents satisfaction for the SWC residents, it enriches their lives and also enables them to be more independent. The newly acquired knowledge of beekeeping makes it possible for them to feel a part of the community and it also helps them connect with other people. Newly acquired knowledge in this field encourages the search for new information about beekeeping independently; even when a beekeeping club does not take place the members look for newspaper articles about bees, pay attention to television programmes on this topic, and browse website. To sum up, the SWC residents who are members of the beekeeping club may well have strengthened their self-confidence and self-esteem.

In the end it needs to be mentioned that this is not the only example of good beekeeping practice performed by Slovene beekeepers. Another contemporary project is also taking place in the SWC Draga. It started after receiving international help and funding. After obtaining basic tools, protective clothing, extractors and containers practical training in the SWC Črnomelj Beekeeping club started to take place. The scheme was officially opened on 26th April 2012.

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