

Protection of all free-living *Apis mellifera* colonies and their rewilding

A free-living colony of *Apis mellifera* is a honey bee colony established spontaneously in a natural or artificial cavity or surface on which it has built its combs, including those resulting from rewilding activities, in the absolute absence of any management, with the exception from external monitoring. These colonies can survive in a natural environment without any care and continue to evolve and adapt to the current challenges of the environment, as a result of natural selection. Historically, managed colonies of *A. mellifera* coexisted with free-living colonies. This coexistence has allowed a continuous exchange of genes between colonies through the species' unique way of reproduction. The constant interaction between managed and free-living honey bee colonies has helped the managed honey bees to be more robust and adapt to local conditions, and ultimately promoted the conservation of local subspecies and ecotypes. In Europe, the arrival of the ectoparasitic mite *Varroa destructor*, between the 1970s and 1980s, led to the near extinction of free-living honey bee colonies and negatively impacted managed colonies, which eventually survived due to the care of beekeepers.

Currently there are reports of free-living honey bee colonies in almost every European country. However, institutions involved in beekeeping and honey bee protection and beekeeping have only recently taken into account the existence of free-living colonies. It is therefore necessary to underline the importance of these colonies from an environmental point of view and the great value they represent for beekeepers today and for future generations. We should protect them as well as encourage the rewilding of *A. mellifera* colonies. For the purposes of this declaration, rewilding can include establishing colonies of local bees which are not managed, excluding emergency feeding or treatment of any kind. Colonies obtained through rewilding activity or through research or restoring projects managed by nationally recognised research organisations are also considered free-living colonies.

In order to protect free-living *Apis mellifera* colonies in Protected Areas, we declare:

1. Free-living colonies of *A. mellifera* are an essential component of biodiversity and a treasure for beekeepers and future generations, which must be protected and kept free to evolve and if possible under the conditions of a natural environment.
2. The suppression or removal of free-living colonies of *A. mellifera*, except in the event of a risk to public safety, constitute a potential damage to the conservation of *Apis mellifera* and its local populations in protected areas and must be discouraged.
3. When necessary, removal or suppression of free-living colonies of *A. mellifera* must be done only by a trained beekeeper.
4. In order to promote the development of free-living colonies of *A. mellifera*, it is strongly suggested not to remove honey, brood, queen bees, royal cells, except in the context of research managed by nationally recognised research bodies.
5. If the placement of swarm traps¹ in protected areas in order to catch natural swarms of free-living colonies of *A. mellifera* can negatively affect the conservation of free-living colonies, this practice

¹ Swarm traps are boxes used by beekeepers to collect swarm and place in their apiaries.

should be discouraged. However, it is also strongly encouraged to leave swarm traps in other sites so that beekeepers can benefit from the genetic source and possible resistance to diseases of free-living colonies.

6. The placement of artificial nests², with the purpose, to encourage the development of free-living colonies of *A. mellifera*, without any management of the colony potentially installed in the nest, must not be considered beekeeping.
7. The placement of an artificial nest to encourage the development of free-living colonies of *A. mellifera* does not allow the ownership of the colony potentially installed in it, and of the swarms generated by the colony.
8. Rewilding activities should only be performed in the context of research or restoring projects.
9. Rewilding activities must only involve honey bees of the local subspecies, population or ecotype.
10. Colonies obtained by rewilding are free-living colonies of *Apis mellifera* as stated in this document.

Pantelleria, May 20, 2022

Signers

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² Artificial nests are boxes placed by humans with the purpose to attract swarm to settle.

