

UK Honey Trade Trends and Effects on Domestic Beekeepers

INTRODUCTION

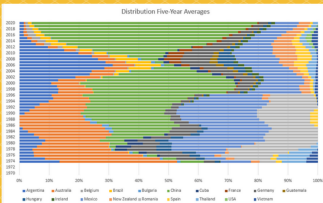
- UN figures show traditional honey-exporting nations in the Americas are reporting drops in honey exports, with increasing exports from eastern hemisphere nations.
- The UK's honey import profile is changing with this, with a recent pivot towards Chinese honey – but upcoming free trade deals with New Zealand and Australia could change this.
- Moritz and Erier (2016) suggest can impact beekeepers in importing nations and thus domestic honeybee colony numbers.
- This project investigates whether the price and country of origin of honey imports affects British honeybee colony numbers.
- Developing knowledge on the relationship between the global honey trade and British colony numbers has important implications as the importance of bees for pollination, food security and ecosystems is hard to overstate.

METHODOLOGY

- Data spanning 1970–2020 on UK bee colony numbers, honey import prices and countries of origin, and UK honey production numbers were collated from all available sources.
- Linear correlation tests were used to establish relationships between variables and sensitivity tests then applied to check the strength of findings.
- This was complemented by qualitative analysis of the Bee Farmers' Association bulletin archive and interviews with five commercial beekeepers.

FINDINGS

- Honey imports into the UK have tripled between 1970 and 2020
- UK honey import prices peaked in the 1970s before crashing down to about 82/kg in the 1990s, growing from 2002 to early 2010s then declining. These prices do not correlate with the amount of honey imported
- UK bee colony numbers remained steady at the 200,000 mark until the 1990s, first declining then recovering to about 270,000
- China (green on below chart) grew to become the UK's largest honey importer during the 80s and 90s, collapsing in 2002–2004 due to an EU ban before recovering to even higher import levels
- Weak positive correlation between colony numbers and import price, strengthening when multi-year averages are used
- Imports from rising Eastern honey exporters correlated negatively with import prices, while imports from the EU, specialist honey exporters and European import-exporters had a positive correlation with import price



Five-year average distribution of 19 nations' honey imports into the UK over time – significant is China (light green), Argentina (deep blue, left) and Australia (orange, left)

DISCUSSION

- The weak positive relationship between honey import prices and colony numbers appears to suggest higher prices benefit British beekeepers and bees, though causation is not established. The negative relationship between imports from the rising Eastern exporters (China, Thailand and Vietnam) and prices suggest these producers push down honey prices, as claimed by Garcia (2018).
- The 2002–2004 EU ban on Chinese honey provides the best opportunity to measure the impact of sharp changes in UK honey imports. In the UK, honey imports declined while honey production and export increased, yet these were short term effects – the only long-term effect was the honey price increase which lasted until the early 2010s.
- Bee Farmers' Association bulletins revealed little concern for cheap imported or adulterated honey but a scare in the early 80s and some mention of cheap honey sold in Aldi and Lidl in the late 2000s. Beekeepers interviewed were mostly unconcerned about the direct price competition from imports.
- However, all supported increased testing of imported honey and more precise labelling as it could push people to choose "more reliable" British honey. All of this supports prior research (Jones Ritten et al., 2019; Bissinger and Herrmann, 2021) that consumers are willing to pay a higher premium for local honeys and that they can be pushed to this when information about "honey laundering" is provided.
- Recommendations include more precise and regular testing of imported honey, as well as inclusion of country of origin labels on imported honey. Further avenues for research include studying consumer perceptions of honey prices and investigation of honey quality by price

Related literature