

INFORMATION SHEET:

South Africa's indigenous honey bees

Common Names: Cape Honey Bee and African Honey Bee

Scientific Names: *Apis mellifera capensis* (Cape) and *Apis mellifera scutellata* (African)

The Cape Honey Bee is the southern-most subspecies of the Western or European honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) and is found in the winter rainfall region of South Africa. The African Honey Bee subspecies is native to central and southern Africa outside the Cape region. While still having the characteristic honey bee striped abdomen, the Cape Honey Bee is characteristically darker in colour.



African (left) and Cape (right) honey bees
[photographers: Peter Webb and John Donaldson]

Why are honey bees important in South Africa?

Both honey bee subspecies play a vital role in human lives as they are managed by beekeepers to allow for honey harvesting and to provide crop pollination for fruits, nuts and vegetables. Both subspecies are also important pollinators of natural vegetation in South Africa. While the honey bee feeds on pollen and nectar of flowering plants, it provides the essential service of transferring pollen from one flower to another – thereby facilitating pollination and the reproduction of the plants. More than 50 crops in South Africa are dependent on insect pollinators, and the majority of farmers arrange for honey bee hives to be brought onto their farms for pollination.

Are South Africa's honey bees in trouble?

Recent reports of massive honey bee losses across the world have stimulated public interest in the honey bee and the resources that the honey bee needs for survival. Honey bee colonies around the world are experiencing problems with the *Varroa* mite pest and diseases like American Foulbrood, as well as problems arising from misuse of pesticides and insecticides in the environment. The South African honey bee subspecies are experiencing similar threats, including: diminishing habitat and forage plants, pests, diseases, and inappropriate agro-chemical regimes. Much research and action is needed to mitigate these threats so that we can sustain healthy honey bee colonies for crop pollination.

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