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Bee the change

The beekeeper taking action

Words Lauren Prebble





There's a stiff crack as the tool snaps the lid open. The hum intensifies. A few puffs of smoke and the hum mellows. Looking down you can see high peaks of wax on the frames and hundreds of bees spilling over the box. Neal continues with the task without protective gloves, unfazed about the bee's sting. The other suited helper is peering over, fascinated, chirping a dozen questions while he works their branded hive. People on the path stop to admire the beekeeper at work.

"I just thought we don't need another commercial beekeeper. That's not what's needed. If I wanted to go down the road of beekeeping I was going to be a bit smarter and think of a different way."

In 2019, Neal McAloon started 'Bee the Change', an environmental service. His mission, to create awareness of our impact on the delicate eco-systems around us including these vital fuzzy pollinators. He installs this message by having apiaries (beehives) in public places and garners businesses to sponsor hives.

"My primary motivation is the environment education. The Maori saying Kaitiakitanga was something that I felt quite strongly about before I even moved to New Zealand. The guardianship of the land."

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is the environment
education."**



Before his apiarist lifestyle, the Southern Lakes based Irishman was an instructor but a 'nasty ski accident' had him in intensive recovery for years. Debilitated and with time on his hands, Neal brooded over his surroundings.

"I was learning a lot about resilience in myself after my ski accident. Resilience in food sources and resilience in the environment."

His engagement with the Queenstown Harvest Community Gardens had him seeking further knowledge about biodiversity. He threw himself into a horticulture course in Cromwell. During the heat of summer learned about the complex workings of a bee colony.

Revelation hooked him on to his mission when watching the documentary 'Pollinators'. The film exposes the poignant truth of global bee decline and catastrophic impact that it's had on the earth's food supplies.

"It's quite terrifying when you start to peel back the layers... That just got me thinking. What can we do, what can we do?"

With an apiculture certification under his belt, he turned to Queenstown Startup to mentor and build structure around the 'Bee the change' environmental service.

"It's very easy to get businesses interested. Harder to get them 'walking the talk'"

12 local businesses are on board 'walking the talk' with their sponsored hives. Their logo is proudly displayed on the front of the box for the public to see. The payment covers everything from queen bees to tin lids. Neal starts the hive from scratch, not even splitting existing colonies.

"A little bit of that payment goes back into education. I don't take anything"

The next hurdle was getting hives in public spaces. Surely bees would be a health and safety headache?

"Bees are already in public spaces." rebuts Neal.

"Bees don't recognise man's arbitrary line maps. They want to go, where they want to go. They don't care about the public".





With careful consideration of the location and flight path and a stringent policy around safety parameters, Neal secured two apiary sites at the Queenstown Gardens and in Arthurs Point.

"QLDC have been really, really positive and forward-thinking."

But this is only the first wave of the master environmental mission. Neal explains that the New Zealand apiculture industry is healthy compared with the rest of the world. The 3 to 5-year plan is to send bees in nucs (small portable hives) to seed crisis areas around the world.

"It's not new. There are two businesses in New Zealand that ship bees to Canada..."

I'm just moving things around, reshaping the model and trying to assist crisis areas rather than it being a business model. There are areas in China where they are pollinating fruit trees with paintbrushes."

But he admits that area of the business is still in the development stage.

"It's quite terrifying when you start to peel back the layers..."

In the meantime, Neal looks to educate about our human impact, locally. His sites will soon have information boards about the bees' habitat and he hopes to start a 'bee buddy' programme to inspire good habits early.

"Every small act can create a more positive or negative aspect on the environment. For example: just leave a little bit of your garden to grow wild, let the clover grow. Don't mow the lawn for the week. That's gonna make a difference.

People don't realise the impact they have."

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