

INFORMATION SHEET:

South Africa's indigenous honeybees

Common Names: Cape honeybee and African honeybee

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

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



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

Why are Honeybees important in South Africa?

Both honeybee 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 honeybee 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 honeybee hives to be brought onto their farms for pollination.

Are South Africa's honeybees in trouble?

Recent reports of massive honeybee losses across the world have stimulated public interest in the honeybee and the resources that the honeybee needs for survival. Honeybee 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 honeybee 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 honeybee colonies for crop pollination.

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