

Project Update: May 2015



With beehive fence construction almost complete for the first stage of our research site in Dewagiriya Village, Sri Lanka, the time has come for the event we've all been eagerly awaiting – introducing bees into their new homes. A bee has many tasks to fulfil as it is: protecting the queen, foraging and gathering pollen, making their delicious honey to name but a few... our bees can add defending homes and crops from elephants to their list of duties. Let's hope it's a task they excel at!

Our beehive fence farmers have been very keen for this day to arrive – most have been looking after their fence structure dutifully – making sure posts are straight, hives are clean and shade roofs are repaired after heavy rain or wind. Having bees to look after increases the incentive to look after the fence – plus, they can finally begin to learn some beekeeping skills, and as time goes on, learn to harvest honey for their own medicinal and culinary benefits, and to earn some additional income from selling the bees delicious wares.



And for everyone involved, and the prime motivation for constructing this research site, we will soon start to learn if the Asian elephants will indeed avoid the Asian honeybees, just as their African cousins do. Learning how the Asian elephants respond to the beehive fence will provide vital information as to how best to manage and develop this technique in Asia, and what role it could potentially play in alleviating human-elephant conflict here. Ideally, we would like to attract bees naturally from the wild, however to get the ball rolling, our lucky first farmers will each have three to four colonies transferred into the hives hanging on their fence. Our first delivery of colonies arrived from Colombo last week and it was a great learning experience for everyone involved in bee handling to transfer the buzzing families into their new hanging homes. We now have three fences with occupied hives, and another five fences to go in the next fortnight.



Elephant activity has been high in Dewagiriya in recent weeks – with the first crop season of the year over, most farmers have stacks of 50 kg rice bags stored in their homes, plus they are already planting for the next season. Elephants are coming up to the homes attracted by the rice they know is stored within. Several incidents have occurred, where elephants have entered gardens destroying banana and coconut plants before being scared away, posts of unoccupied beehive fences have been knocked down. Most devastating of all, the house of one young couple with a small baby was almost completely destroyed after

elephants raided their property twice in one week. Unfortunately, this type of event is not an isolated occurrence, and emphasises strongly why it is so vital to help farmers devise means of protecting their homes and crops.

Let's hope the beehive fences, full of our little guardians of nature, can also become the guardians these farmers need to keep their families and livelihoods safer at nights.



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