



Fondazzjoni għall-Konservazzjoni tan-Naħla Maltija

Għall-Apikultura Sostenibbli!

PRESS RELEASE

PR23-01

Clarifications Regarding the Initiative to Designate the Maltese Honey Bee as the National Insect

Monday, 13th November 2023 - With reference to the news article that was published on Newsbook Malta online portal on the 8th of November 2023 entitled “Ministers urged to protect Maltese honey Bee”^{1,2}. The article reports that the voluntary organisation 'Breeds of Origin Conservancy' has sent an open letter expressing concern about the proposal to designate the Maltese honey bee (*Apis mellifera ruttneri*) as the national insect. As this is an initiative of our organisation (*Fondazzjoni għall-Konservazzjoni tan-Naħla Maltija*), the Foundation feels obliged to issue this press release to rectify several inaccuracies present in the article. Additionally, we aim to clarify any concerns within the beekeeping sector that may have arisen due to this statement.

The said initiative is grounded in a legal study concerning ‘Maltese and European laws related to the Genetic Protection of the Endemic Maltese Honey Bee’³, which was commissioned by our Foundation and later published in a renowned international legal journal. The study recommends that, in the current situation, the most plausible way to elevate the status of this endemic subspecies is to have it declared as the national insect of Malta by the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA). This initiative is already being supported by politicians, academics, organisations, and regional/ local councils.

The article states that 'Breeds of Origin Conservancy' recommends exploring other legal mechanisms, such as Regulation (EU) No 511/2014, which they claimed is better suited for safeguarding Maltese autochthonous species and breeds. The Conservancy proposes that the honey bee be recognised as a genetic resource alongside other established agricultural animals, such as Maltese indigenous cows, goats, and black chickens.

¹ Balzan, J. (2023, November 8). Ministers urged to protect Maltese honeybee. Newsbook. <https://newsbook.com.mt/en/ministers-urged-to-protect-maltese-honeybee>

² Teuma, O. (2023, Novembru 8). Thassib fuq jekk in-naħla Maltija għandiex titqies bħala insett nazzjonali. Newsbook. <https://newsbook.com.mt/thassib-fuq-jekk-in-naħla-maltija-għandiex-titqies-bħala-insett-nazzjonali>

³ David Chetcuti Dimech, Simone Borg, Abner Joe Buttigieg, and Dylan Farrugia. "Review of the Maltese and European Laws related to the Genetic Protection of the Endemic Maltese Honey Bee (*Apis mellifera ruttneri*)."
European Energy and Environmental Law Review 32, no. 3 (2023).

We emphasise that EU Regulation 511/2014 (given effect locally through S.L. 549.111) deals purely with the registration etc. of genetic resources and their trade between States (building on the Rio Convention on Biological Diversity). This means the Regulation, and implementing local legislation, does not authorise initiatives for genetic cleansing in order to safeguard the genetic integrity of a given species or subspecies. Hence, this registration should complement the Foundation's initiative rather than serve as a substitute for it.

It is important to note that the Maltese honey bee must be treated differently to other livestock deemed to be of Maltese origin. This is because the latter livestock, such as the ox, goat, and black chicken, are all breeds of their respective (sub)species. The honey bee is scientifically recognised as a subspecies in its own right. This means that the laws on environmental protection are applicable to it, while they are not for breeds since they do not occur in the wild. This approach is substantiated by the EU Habitats Directive (and the local S.L. 549.49 that transposes it), which provides that species of agricultural importance must be protected as well. The Maltese honey bee clearly falls under this definition. To be clear, the law uses the word 'components of biodiversity', and once biological diversity is defined as including 'diversity within species', then the Maltese honey bee can benefit from these laws.

It is the laws on environmental protection that allow the taking of initiatives to preserve the genetic identity of this subspecies. The Rio Convention, Habitats Directive, and local S.L. 549.49 all require the State to protect genetic resources, as well as components of biodiversity of agricultural importance. This means the argument that the form of protection sought under these laws applies solely to wild species, in the strictest sense of the word (wildlife), is untenable. It clearly also applies to species used in agriculture, more so where these are endemic species that evolved without human intervention (contrary to the Maltese breeds abovementioned). Hence, the fact that the honey bee is used in agriculture is ancillary to the main point that these laws require its protection in legal terms as an endemic species.

The fear that legal protection as 'national insect' will cause added bureaucracy to the apiculture industry is unfounded. If one recognises the need to protect the honey bee's genetic integrity, controlling its use and things connected to that use is a natural consequence. The other option is to lose the subspecies entirely through genetic hybridisation. Consequently, the conditions on use must be present irrespective of the law under which the honey bee is protected.

It is true that other European Union jurisdictions that have legally protected bee species native to their territories did so through laws that were mainly livestock-oriented (or similar) – though this is not the case with Ireland. However, the end result was also the banning of importations of foreign honey bees, the requeening of honey bee colonies, and the control of use of local honey bees (including through licensing etc.) in order to preserve the honey bee's genetic identity as a component of biodiversity.

The benefit of designating the honey bee as a national insect lies in the fact that it gives the Maltese honey bee extra clout – like the Blue rock-thrush ('Merill') or Maltese rock-centaury ('Widnet il-Baħar'). The honey bee is an easy animal to like and to attract public affection. Its protection can be utilised to turn it into a flagship to encourage more protection of pollinators, as well as easily be integrated into the pollinators' strategy that the ERA is currently drafting. Designation as a national insect also forces more commitment from the authorities in ensuring the honey bee's protection. This would be without prejudice to the apiculture industry, because it is possible to licence allowed activities – apiculture and related activities can easily (and very justifiably) be one of these. Actually, it should be, because beekeepers are essentially the

primary breeders of bees. It therefore offers added protection to the apiculture industry because beekeeping would become an important tool to secure the Maltese honey bee's continued survival, including in terms of genetic purity.

For the Foundation, communication and collaboration are fundamental aspects of our mission, and they are also enshrined in our organisational statute. Our organisation is committed towards our initiative and is constantly seeking collaborators and support, including from other organisations involved in apiculture in order to discuss and exchange ideas. We firmly believe in the power of unity as a collective strength that should serve as a force in addressing the significant challenges confronting the apicultural sector of which the Maltese honey bee is pivotal. We continue to emphasise the importance of cooperation and collaboration, in line with the principles that have defined the ethos of our Foundation throughout its short but impactful history.

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