

Protecting our Native Honey Bees: A Consolidating International Movement

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Across Europe, the momentum behind protecting native honey bee subspecies is growing. What once felt like isolated efforts are now gradually forming a unified, international movement and our Foundation in Malta is proud to be part of it.

In the United Kingdom, a recent petition has called for an end to honey bee imports into Great Britain from the EU via Northern Ireland. For us in Malta, this issue strikes particularly close to home. This is since the UK is one of the markets to which commercial queen-rearing operations in Malta export their queens. The knowledge that such practices contributing to irreversible genetic erosion, not only are threatening the sustainability of Malta's own apicultural sector but also impacting apiculture and biodiversity beyond our shores, is a sobering and deeply troubling realisation.

Ireland and NIHBS' efforts have emerged as an exemplary model on native honey bee conservation in recent years, and has been at the forefront ever since. A pivotal milestone is the Protection of the Native Irish Honey Bee Bill, which seeks to legally prohibit the importation of non-native honey bee subspecies and hybrids. Complementing this legal framework is

the NIHBS' Queen Rearing Group Scheme, a collaborative initiative that is supporting beekeepers in breeding and rearing queens of pure native stock. This scheme is not only strengthening the population of genetically authentic bees but also fosters knowledge-sharing, best practices, and a sense of stewardship among Irish beekeepers. The establishment of designated Conservation Areas, where native bee populations are actively monitored and protected from genetic contamination and environmental pressures is another notable effort.



Apis mellifera ruttneri
The Maltese honey bee



In Malta, the Foundation's efforts bore their first fruits in September 2024, when the endemic *Apis mellifera ruttneri* was officially declared Malta's National Insect, after a successful campaign. Yet symbolic recognition alone is not enough. That's why the Foundation now launched a process to formulise a concrete Action Plan for the Conservation of the National Insect. This will be a science-based, community-driven strategy to ensure the long-term survival of Malta's native honey bee. The first phase during which the Foundation is collecting public feedback on the objectives set for the action plan is already in full swing.

In our closing remark, we would like to reflect on our experience at the SICAMM Conference in Norway a few months ago.

It was a truly enriching opportunity to connect with so many dedicated NIHBS members. Your passion, unwavering commitment, and coordinated efforts to protect the native Irish honey bee were not only inspiring but have significantly energised our own conservation work here in Malta.

PS: This marks our third article in as many years for the Four Seasons newsletter, an annual (now) tradition we hope to continue. We congratulate NIHBS for your outstanding efforts and thank the editorial board for this platform to share our thoughts with you, in this common conservation journey, separated by distance but united by passion!

[Ed. Four Seasons hopes so too.]

NIHBS is opposed to the importation of honey bees onto the island of Ireland