Bee Keeping A Growth Industry In Caribbean, As It Declines In US

When the International Monetary Fund projected recently that Guyana's economy could jump by 86 percent in 2020, it credited recent oil and gas discoveries. But a different buzz is exciting two of the South American nation's premier industries, agribusiness and tourism. They're looking to marry their sectors to offer a new attraction to visitors: bees.

Guyana is not alone. For decades, the Caribbean has counted on its **pristine beaches — and Guyana on its lush rainforests — to draw millions of visitors**. Now, the region's countries are increasingly looking to broaden their draw with **bee tourism** — also known as apitourism — at a time the populations of more than 700 North American bee varieties are on the decline, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

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Safari guests examine a colony of European bees at an apiary in Canaan, Tobago.

Trinidad and Tobago is hosting a bee safari in early 2020, publicizing the event as a way to beat the winter blues while gaining insights into tropical beekeeping. In St. Lucia, the Washington-based Global Environment Facility — a

partnership of 183 nations and civil society organizations — is backing local beekeepers who are offering four-day bee safaris and one-day bee farm tours.

Starting in 2020, Eden Farm Tours in Grenada will offer apitherapy spa packages. The company is also trying to launch the Caribbean's first medical-grade honey. The Compete Caribbean Partnership Facility — a collaboration of regional private sector firms — and the Caribbean Tourism Organization recently announced grants of up to $400,000 for innovative new agritourism initiatives, including in bee tourism.

> *IT IS ONLY NATURAL TO SEE HOW WE CAN USE AGRICULTURE AS A BASE FOR PROVIDING SATISFACTORY TOURISM EXPERIENCES.*
> *DONALD SINCLAIR, DIRECTOR GENERAL, GUYANA'S DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM*

Guyana plans on offering three- to five-day safari tours for tourists to sample the country's varieties of honey while observing domestic hives. This support from governments and regional and global organizations points to the growing confidence that bee tourism could add to the region's estimated $56 billion annual tourism revenue, and capture a slice of the global apiculture industry that's estimated to touch $10 billion by 2023.

"Guyana has vast agricultural resources and is a strong emerging tourism destination," says Donald Sinclair, director general of Guyana's Department of Tourism. "So it is only natural to see how we can use agriculture as a base for providing satisfactory tourism experiences."

The Guyana Apiculture Society plans to take visitors to apiaries near the majestic Demerara and Essequibo rivers, says the body's vice president, Linden Stewart. Tourists will see bees pollinating blossoms, then visit a honey house to observe the extraction, filtration and bottling of honey with an opportunity for sampling.

For the region's beekeepers, tapping into tourism makes sense. "When you are in a Caribbean island … if you are not in tourism, you are not in business," says Richard Matthias, president of the Iyanola Apiculture Collective in St. Lucia.

bees3Photo from Jewel Fraser

Gladstone Solomon at his apiary in a forest in Mount St. George, Tobago. Source Jewel Fraser

For tourists, the Caribbean promises opportunities impossible to find in North America, say experts. Caribbean bees have a very different diet, says Gladstone Solomon, former president of the Association of Caribbean Beekeepers' Organizations. In North America, bees often have to settle for acres of almonds or other monoculture crops. In the Caribbean, bees forage on a range of nectar sources, from forest trees to shrubs to commercial plants. As a consequence, the honey produced in the Caribbean varies throughout the year, depending on the plants flowering at the time, explains Matthias. "At some times of the year some flowers may be predominant; at other times there is a mixture of nice floral bouquets," he says. "At the end of the year other trees come into flower and the honey tastes like licorice."

When Solomon, 70, started bee safaris in Tobago nearly two decades ago, he was a pioneer. Now, increasing numbers of regional players are entering the market. His 11-day safaris target bee enthusiasts and also expose them to local cuisine and a steel band rehearsal in Trinidad. “It’s not a niche that would be attractive to everyone,” he admits, but it works “in an era where increasing numbers of persons are looking for unique experiences.”

For now, Slovenia is the world leader in bee tourism with resorts and marketing dedicated to the sector. Matthias acknowledges the Caribbean has some catching up to do, but adds that it has advantages. For one, there’s its unrivaled natural beauty. Tourists on the St. Lucia bee safaris visit the island’s famous Pitons — mountainous volcanic plugs — mangroves and virgin forest. And Caribbean bee tourism has started receiving significant financial support. The Global Environment Facility has awarded Matthias’ collective a $50,000 grant to establish a tour service targeting the 600,000 cruise ship visitors who come to St. Lucia each year.

Recent research by University of Arkansas scientists also suggests that bees that feast on monoculture crops are **nutritionally deprived**. That means the healthier Caribbean bees might be the future of bee tourism in the Americas.

To be sure, beekeeping in the Caribbean comes with its own challenges — pesticides, beehive theft and inadequate pasture for hosting apiaries are some key ones, says Hayden Sinanan, inspector of apiaries in Trinidad and Tobago’s Ministry of Agriculture. Both Solomon, who runs six apiaries in Trinidad and Tobago, and Ravi Rajkumar, a third-generation beekeeper in Guyana, cite the lack of pasture area as a major concern. The Trinidadian government has promised more land but has yet to deliver, says Solomon, who holds a bachelor’s degree in tourism management and a master’s in agriculture and rural development. Adding to expenses, says Matthias, is that most equipment needed to run apiaries has to be imported.

But where there is a will, there is a way. Once decision-makers understand the importance of bees to the environment, they'll do more to support apitourism, says Sinanan. "If there is something wrong in the natural environment it will be seen first in a bee colony," he says. "They are the canary in the coal mine."

(SOURCE) StkittsnevisObserver