

Environmentalist scare stories – Never mind!

Solid evidence shows there is no “bee-pocalypse,” but alarmists allege new pesticide threats

Paul Driessen

“Baby boomers” will remember Gilder Radner’s *Saturday Night Live* character from the ‘70s – Emily Litella, who would launch into hilarious rants against perceived problems, only to discover that she had completely misconstrued what she was fuming about.

“What’s all this fuss about endangered feces?” she asked in one. “How can you possibly run out of such a thing?” Then, after Jane Curtain interrupted to tell her “It’s endangered *species*,” she meekly responded with what became the iconic denouement of the era: “Ohhhh. *Never mind*.”

The Sierra Club and “invertebrate-protecting” Xerces Society recently had their own Emily Litella moment, over an issue they both have been hyperventilating about for years: endangered bees. For over half a decade, both organizations have been raising alarms about the [imminent extinction of honeybees](#) and, more recently, wild bees – allegedly due to the widespread use of neonicotinoid pesticides.

These are advanced-technology crop protection compounds, originally developed and registered as “reduced-risk” pesticides. Applied mostly as seed treatments, [neonicotinoids get taken up](#) into the tissue of crop plants, where they control pests that *feed on and destroy the crops*, while minimizing insecticide exposure to animals, humans and beneficial species like bees.

But not according to the Sierra Club! It campaigned incessantly for years on the claim that neonicotinoids would drive honeybees into extinction. For instance, in March 2015 the Sierra Club of Canada launched a nationwide “[Protect the Pollinators Tour](#),” as part of its #SaveTheBees project.

“Ironically, the justification for this chemical *madness* is the same desire to produce enough food to feed everyone,” it said. “The chemical industry wants us to believe we have no choice; it’s their way or the highway. But the science tells us otherwise – that farmers don’t need these chemicals at all! The science also tells us we’re not just killing bees and pollinators, but other insects too. And we’re also killing birds and aquatic life. The scientists tell us we could be creating a *Second Silent Spring*. **It’s madness.**”

A year later, the Maryland Sierra Club did its own fulminating, urging the state’s legislature to pass a “Pollinator Protection Act. “Help STOP Pollinator Deaths from Neonics Pesticides!” it exhorted.

“Toxic Neonic pesticides kill and harm bees and other pollinators, like butterflies and birds. Continued, unchecked use poses a serious threat to our food supply, public health and environment. Ask lawmakers to help keep Maryland pollinators safe and healthy – by curbing consumer use of toxic pesticides.”

In December 2016, the Sierra Club was out raising more money by sounding phony alarms about Trump appointees “denying the science” that supposedly links neonic pesticides to alleged bee declines:

“Bees had a devastating year. 44% of colonies killed.... And Bayer and Syngenta are still flooding our land with bee-killing toxic ‘neonic’ pesticides – now among the most widely used crop sprays in the country. Now, Myron Ebell – Donald Trump’s pick to lead the EPA transition team – denies the science that links neonics and bee death....”

Why would they make such false claims? Well, as Sierra Club officer Bruce Hamilton once admitted: “It’s what works. It builds the Sierra Club. The fate of the Earth depends on whether people open that envelope and send in that check” (or click on the ever-present online Donate Now button).

However, a few weeks ago, a Sierra Club [blog post](#) started singing a different tune:

“‘Save the bees’ is a rallying cry we’ve been hearing for years now.... But honeybees are at no risk of dying off. While diseases, parasites and other threats are certainly real problems for beekeepers, the total number of managed honeybees worldwide has risen 45% over the last half century. ‘Honeybees are not going to go extinct,’ says Scott Black, executive director of the Xerces Society. ‘We have more honeybee hives than we’ve ever had, and that’s simply because we manage honeybees. Conserving honeybees to

save pollinators is like conserving chickens to save birds ... [since] honeybees are not all that different from livestock.”

So, Never mind. Finally, after all these years, the Sierra Club (and Xerces Society) admit that honeybees are not going extinct. It would appear as well that neonic pesticides can't be causing a honeybee apocalypse – because there isn't one!

But in the eco-alarmism world, every silver cloud has a dark lining! This time, it's [wild bees](#), also called “native” bees, whose allegedly looming demise is the imminent ecological cataclysm *du jour*.

Honeybees are not native to North America; they were first brought here by colonists in 1622. Now – according to the Sierra Club anyway – these non-native bees pose a threat to wild bees and other native pollinators. New research, it says, “shows managed honeybees can negatively impact native bees.”

Varroa mites, deformed wing virus and other problems from commercial hives (the real causes of honeybee declines in recent years) “can be transferred to wild species when populations feed from the same flowers.” In fact, the [rusty patched bumblebee](#), “which was listed as endangered in early 2017 after declining more than 90 percent over the last decade, may owe that disappearance to diseases spread by commercial bees.” And the RPB is not the only threatened or endangered wild bee species.

Many native bees – of which there are over 20,000 species globally, in various sizes, shapes and colors – “are experiencing incredible losses,” says a Sierra Club blog. “Of the nearly 4,000 native bee species in the United States alone, four native bumblebee species have declined 96 percent in the last 20 years, and three others are believed to have gone extinct. In the last 100 years, 50 percent of Midwestern native bee species disappeared from their historic ranges.”

Now the blog doesn't claim all these supposed wild bee declines are due to neonic exposure. At least it doesn't say so just yet, leaving that inference to your imagination. However, the Sierra Club is likely just as wrong about wild bee species being in trouble, as it was during its previous years of railing about the causes and reality of honeybees going extinct.

First, the overwhelming majority of wild bee species, at least in North America, never get any exposure to neonicotinoid pesticides, because they are *desert species* – with habitats typically tens or hundreds of miles away from croplands.

Second, the overwhelming majority of those wild bee species are *specialists*. They feed exclusively on the pollen and/or nectar of one or a very few plant species – and their life-cycles are tied inextricably to the flowering cycle of the (mainly desert) plants they pollinate.

They typically emerge from the ground prompted by the same natural signals (rains) that awaken the cacti and other plants. They then live just long enough to produce larvae and stock the larval nests with food (pollen and/or nectar) from the plants they pollinate before they die. This cycle is completed in days – and pesticide exposure is virtually impossible given the environments where it takes place.

All this is not to say that wild bees don't play any role in crop pollination. Some do.

However, 59 scientists published a [three-year study](#) in *Nature*, concluding that only 2% of wild bee species provide “almost 80% of the wild bee crop pollination.” They also found that “the species currently contributing most to pollination service delivery are generally regionally common species, whereas threatened species contribute little, particularly in the most agriculturally productive areas.”

In other words, the handful of wild bee species that contribute the lion's share of wild bee crop pollination – and thus are most exposed to neonic and other pesticides – are abundant and *not* threatened or at risk, certainly not from pesticide exposure.

This jibes with the observations by [Sam Droege](#), the U.S. Geologic Survey's wild bee expert whose surveys indicate that most wild bee species are doing just fine.

It's encouraging that the Sierra Club and Xerces Society have finally acknowledged that the “honeybee apocalypse” – which they used for years to demonize neonic manufacturers and raise

millions of dollars – was pure fiction. Eventually, perhaps, we hope (fat chance) they'll admit their exaggerated claims and half-truths about wild bees are equally phony and misleading.

It's a real pity that so much public hysteria – and pressure on politicians and regulators to combat fictitious bee problems – was generated in the process. That was especially true in Europe, where regulators gave in to agitator pressure and misrepresentations, and banned neonics this year. Now farmers will have to spray crops with pesticides that really are harmful to bees, or will lose more to voracious insects.

Environmental activists always claim to be pushing for better public policies, to “Save the Earth.” Misdiagnosing and misrepresenting non-existent ecological crises is precisely the road to the hell of *bad* public policy. And it's not always paved with good intentions.

At least when it comes to claims about another “bee-pocalypse,” it's time to say, *Never mind*.

Paul Driessen is the author of *Eco-Imperialism: Green power - Black death* and other books and articles on energy, climate change and environmental activism.