GUEST EDITORIAL

The COLOSS BEEBOOK Volume I, Standard methods for Apis mellifera research: Introduction

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Received 29 July 2013, accepted for publication 31 July 2013.

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Keywords: COLOSS, BEEBOOK, honey bee, Apis mellifera, research, standard methods, laboratory, field

The COLOSS BEEBOOK is a practical manual compiling standard methods in all fields of research on the western honey bee, Apis mellifera. The COLOSS network was founded in 2008 as a consequence of the heavy and frequent losses of managed honey bee colonies experienced in many regions of the world (Reumann and Carreck, 2010). As many of the world’s honey bee research teams began to address the problem, it soon became obvious that a lack of standardized research methods was seriously hindering scientists’ ability to harmonize and compare the data on colony losses obtained internationally. In its second year of activity, during a COLOSS meeting held in Bern, Switzerland, the idea of a manual of standardized honey bee research methods emerged. The manual, to be called the COLOSS BEEBOOK, was inspired by publications with similar purposes for fruit fly research (Lindsay and Groll, 1968; Ashburner 1989; Roberts, 1998; Greenspan, 2004).

Production of the BEEBOOK began after recruiting international experts to lead the compilation of each research domain. These senior authors (first in the author list) were tasked with recruiting a suitable team of contributors to select the methods to be used as standards and then to report them in a user-friendly manner (Williams et al., 2012).

The initial BEEBOOK project is divided into three volumes: The COLOSS BEEBOOK Volume I: Standard methods for Apis mellifera research; The COLOSS BEEBOOK Volume II: Standard methods for Apis mellifera pest and pathogen research; and The COLOSS BEEBOOK Volume III: Standard methods for Apis mellifera product research.

Papers in the BEEBOOK are organized according to research topics. The authors have compiled those methods selected as the "best" in each domain of research. These methods are for both laboratory and field research. We recognize that it is often necessary to use methods from several domains of research to complete a given experiment with honey bees. Whenever there is a need for multidisciplinary approach, the manual describes the specific instructions necessary for a given method, and cross references all general methods from other papers as necessary. For example, identifying a subspecies of honey bee can be done using genetic tools. The general instructions to use microsatellites are given in the molecular methods paper (Evans et al., 2013), whereas the specific method appropriate for subspecies identification is described in the paper on ecotypes and subspecies identification (Meixner et al., 2013). Consequently, one would visit the ecotypes paper to determine how to identify a given subspecies. That paper will then refer to the molecular methods paper when discussing microsatellites specifically.

The reader may wonder about the difference between the BEEBOOK and existing standards provided by the Office International des Epizooties (OIE), and the European Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In the BEEBOOK we often refer to OIE, OECD, and other standards, since they describe methods to diagnose pests and diseases (OIE) or to perform, for example, routine analyses for toxicity tests (OECD). The BEEBOOK, however, goes well beyond diagnosis and routine analyses by describing the methods to perform research on the honey bee and associated organisms. Where necessary, the BEEBOOK recognizes existing standards such as those provided by the OIE and OECD, and presents a harmonized compendium of research methods, written and reviewed by an international team of scientists.

In addition to producing a bench-friendly manual, and in an effort to make the methods broadly available, every paper forming the BEEBOOK is also available as open access articles in several special issues of the Journal of Apicultural Research.

To further build on the availability of digital media, a novel concept was developed around the manual. An online version of the manual was created, where each method can be discussed and improvements suggested. Development work on the online BEEBOOK platform started in 2009, and the current iteration can be found at.
www.coloss.org/beebook. On the platform, each webpage describing a method has a comment field, which can be used to suggest changes or additions. Users can thus assist with the improvement and further development of the BEEBOOK. Once sufficient updates have accumulated online, a new print version of the manual can then be edited and published. Such a Wiki-like tool is especially useful for following fast evolving fields, such as for molecular protocols.

The BEEBOOK is a tool for all who want to do research on honey bees. It was written in such a way that those new to honey bee research can use it to start research in a field with which they may not be familiar. Of course, such an endeavour is often limited by the availability of complex and expensive machinery and other equipment. However, provided access to and training on the necessary equipment are secured, the instructions provided in the BEEBOOK can be followed by everyone, from undergraduate student to experienced researcher. All details on how to implement instructions are given.

The editors and author team hope that the BEEBOOK will serve as a reference tool for honey bee and other researchers globally. As with the original Orasophie book that evolved into a journal where updates and new methods are published, we hope that the honey bee research community will embrace this tool and work to improve it. The online platform is open for everyone to use and further contribute to the development of our research field.

The study of honey bees is globally relevant and remarkably varied. In the applied sense, honey bees have been studied due to their use as producers of honey and suppliers of pollination services in agricultural situations. Furthermore, honey bee research has been used as a model organism to address basic questions in molecular biology (Evans et al., 2013), physiology and biochemistry (Hartfelder et al., 2013), pollination (Delaplane et al., 2013), rearing and selecting queens (Bücher et al., 2013), statistics (Pirk et al., 2013), and toxicology (Medrzycki et al., 2013). It was our intention to be exhaustive when working with senior authors to develop the chapters included in Volume I. We hope that we have included all of the relevant research domains but recognize that, as with any undertaking of such size, we may have overlooked important topics, and new topics and research areas may well emerge in the future. If so, this can be addressed via the online BEEBOOK platform (www.coloss.org/beebook), leading to an improved version in the future.

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Acknowledgements

The COLOSS (Prevention of honey bee COlony LOSSes) network aims to explain and prevent massive honey bee colony losses. It was funded through the COST Action FA0803. COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a unique means for European researchers to jointly develop their own ideas and new initiatives across all scientific disciplines through trans-European networking of nationally funded research activities. Based on a pan-European intergovernmental framework for cooperation in science and technology, COST has contributed since its creation more than 40 years ago to closing the gap between science, policy makers and society throughout Europe and beyond. COST is supported by the EU Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration activities (Official Journal L 412, 30 December 2006). The European Science Foundation as implementing agent of COST provides the COST Office through an EC Grant Agreement. The Council of the European Union provides the COST Secretariat. The COLOSS network is now supported by the Ricola Foundation - Nature & Culture.
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