



Sweetening the Pot

By introducing new technologies and by supporting rural women to begin sustainable business ventures, FARM-Africa is working to strengthen forest-based livelihoods and conserve natural resources

Since antiquity Ethiopia has been known as a rich source of honey and beeswax. Today it is the largest honey producer in Africa with much of the supply used to make a local mead known as tej and a non-alcoholic drink called berz. Ethiopian beeswax, like much of that sourced from across Africa, commands a high price on the international market for its purity

and is also used locally to make ceremonial candles burnt in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. But despite its importance to rural household economies and the environment in general, beekeeping has received limited technical and financial support. This was certainly the case in the Bale Mountains, which houses diverse honeybee flora such as Giant Heath (*Erica*

arborea) and Giant St. John's Wort (*Hypericum revolutum*), which can yield a range of monoflora honeys.

30 year old Meymuna Ahmed resettled in Bale seven years ago and now lives with her husband Adam and their five children. Meymuna and her family have benefitted from FARM-Africa's support of local beekeepers as part of the Bale Eco-Region Sustainable Management Programme (BERSMP). BERSMP has been operating with 2006 and is a joint project with SOS Sahel Ethiopia and a newly established government forestry service called the Bale Forest Enterprise. Like many recent settlers in Bale, the family are from an agricultural area and cleared a patch of forest to start cultivation. With FARM-Africa's help, beekeeping now provides a means to diversify their livelihood and sustainably manage their forest resources.

Meymuna was trained to construct a beehive, known as the Kenyan top-bar hive, from locally available materials such as bamboo. Previously, nearly all beehives in the Bale Mountains were constructed from hollowed out logs; a practice that was environmentally destructive and that limited yield. The hives that FARM-Africa introduced are much more efficient to produce and manage but are cheaper and require less skill than the modern frame hives that are found in Europe. In Bale, a single topbar hive can yield

approximately 30 kg of honey and beeswax twice a year.

As well as hive construction, Meymuna and others were trained how to harvest honeycomb, separate honey and beeswax, how to reduce the chance of a colony absconding and how to prevent pests while also being provided with a veil and smoker. She has so far constructed eight hives and is now a member of a beekeeping group that plans to market their honey collectively in order to increase their market leverage and realise higher prices.

FARM-Africa has focused particular attention on women like Meymuna and supported them to form savings and credit groups that allow them to earn money and support their families. Many of these women were previously entirely dependent on fuelwood selling; a physically grueling and environmentally unsustainable livelihood. Helping to diversify their livelihoods reduces the unsustainable use of resources that accompanies resource dependence.

Now Meymuna and others are beginning to take a much larger role in the management of natural resources and their knowledge of the uses of many plants is being recognised. By supporting women and forest product development, FARM-Africa is providing a route to strengthened livelihoods and a way to sustainably utilise natural resources.



A Kenyan top-bar hive Andrew Ridgewell