Farmers Interview

Martin & Johannes Punz

Ybbs / Austria

Programme: Erasmus+ Bees and More

Participants:

- Student – Researcher
- Martin & Johannes Punz (Farmers)

Interview Transcript

Anna Eder:
Okay, good afternoon. My name is Anna Eder, and today I have the opportunity to conduct an interview with Johannes and Martin Punz, two local farmers from Oberndorf an der Melk.
First of all, I would like to thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me today. Let me briefly introduce myself as well. My name is Anna Eder, and I am currently in the fifth year at HAK YBBS. The focus of my diploma thesis is on awareness-raising, communication, and debating in relation to bees, sustainability, and biodiversity.
At the beginning, I would also like to point out that the interview will be recorded on video and audio.
Alright, then we will start with the first question.
Do you keep bees on your farm yourselves, or do you work together with beekeepers from the region?
Do you see bees as an important resource for your farm?

Martin Punz:
We do have bees—two colonies, one or two colonies—but they're not really a resource for us. It's more of a hobby, mainly for our own supply and for pollination.

Anna Eder:
Okay, yes.
Well, that actually already answers the second question, but I still have to ask it because it's required.
In your opinion, what influence do bees have on the productivity of your farm? Have you noticed any advantages when there are many bees in or around your fields?

Martin Punz:
Regarding fruit, I definitely noticed a difference.

Anna Eder:
Okay, yes.

Martin Punz:
And fruits or field crops that require cross-pollination by bees—we don't really grow those, for example rapeseed.
But there pollination is very important. Those crops need external pollinators, and the farms that grow them absolutely depend on pollination. Otherwise nothing grows—there's no fruit.
We don't grow such crops ourselves.
But like I said, with fruit—during apple and pear harvest—you definitely notice that pears are there. And that's because the neighbors nearby have bees. You can see that clearly, because a few colonies are not enough to pollinate the whole area. You need more.

Anna Eder:
Okay, yes.
How do you deal with protecting bees nearby?
re there any measures you take for that?

Martin Punz:
My son manages the farm, and he is very careful when it comes to weed control and the use of pesticides.
For example, during fodder harvesting—when mowing grass—if something is flowering, we mow in the morning when fewer bees are flying. We do pay attention to that.

Anna Eder:
Okay, yes.
Have you noticed any changes in bee activity or in the number of bees in recent years? Whether it has decreased or maybe increased?

Martin Punz:
Well, bees also have pests. The varroa mite varies—it's a bit different every year.
And it also depends on the weather. If autumn is quite mild, colonies develop well in autumn, and reinfection can occur even if you have already treated them. Then winter mortality can be higher.
It also depends a lot on breeding the queens. Some queens are more focused on reproduction, which is not so desirable, because then the colony swarms. That means you get more colonies but less honey.

I'm not a professional beekeeper—I'm a hobby beekeeper.
Professional beekeepers make splits so that the queen can lay eggs again when there isn't much brood, to prevent the colony from becoming too large. If the colony becomes too strong, it starts to swarm so reproduction happens and there aren't too many bees in the same hive.

Johannes Punz:
When it comes to wild bees, there are hardly any left.
That was actually the reason why my father brought bee colonies back to the farm. We hardly saw any bees anymore, and we didn't like that because we love nature.
We didn't do it mainly because of our fruit or because we wanted our own honey. The first thought was simply that we wanted to have bees around again, because wild bees had become so rare and we hardly saw them anymore.
We definitely noticed that compared to the past, there were far fewer.

Martin Punz:
Yes, there were a few "silent spring" years.
Nothing was flying. Everything was already in bloom, but there were no bees or insects flying around. That's when we decided to put bee colonies there so that at least something would be around.
It also had to do with the weather. Everything started blooming, but the insects weren't there anymore. But in general, it's true that there are fewer insects.
There are wild bees too—I don't know how many, maybe 300 or 400 species, from what I've heard, even in Austria.
You can also try to build habitats for them, but it's not that easy. You can make mistakes with that—you have to do it professionally.
The best thing would really be to leave natural areas.

Johannes Punz:
Yes, dead wood, right?
It would be great to leave trees that have already died standing, because wild bees like to live in cavities like that. They settle there and build colonies.
Nowadays everything gets removed immediately, and that's negative for things like that.

Martin Punz:
That would be very important.
There are already subsidies and regulations encouraging flowering areas, but actually there should be even more.

Johannes Punz:
I think that's also one of your questions.

Anna Eder:
Yes, it actually was—whether you see that more as an opportunity or as a challenge to implement such measures.

Johannes Punz:
We already did that before it was subsidized. From an economic perspective, during the first cut in spring—the first time we mow—we leave several hectares standing so they can bloom.
For example, areas along the roadside slopes or our own slopes with trees or orchards—we leave all that to bloom and we don't fertilize it. Then wildflowers grow there: daisies, meadow sage, and many other plants.
Later we make hay from it.
And there's a lot going on there—lots of insects, bees, bumblebees, everything.
That's when you realize that nature also needs it. You can't only have intensively managed areas, because animals might not be able to use those when they need them. They need alternative habitats.
We have quite a lot of pasture land, and there it's quiet as well.

Martin Punz:
We also don't fertilize our pastures.
And more things bloom there—from start to finish. Wild peas and all kinds of plants grow there.
You can really see that if you let nature be, it also benefits pollination and bees.
But truly free-living wild bees hardly exist here anymore like they used to.

Johannes Punz:
But truly wild honeybees—the ones you used to see in the past when you were walking and found a hive somewhere—that hardly exists anymore.
At least we don't see them anymore. Very rarely.
We do have bumblebees though. Definitely.
And for a few years now we've also had… what's it called… the alpine bee?
We've had it for a few years now—it's a very large insect, shiny black. I once looked it up online and I think it might be the alpine bee. We see it every year flying around.
Maybe you can research what it's actually called.

Anna Eder:
Yes.

Johannes Punz:
Maybe I can show you a picture on my phone later.
It's a huge insect. It looks a bit like a bumblebee, but it's completely coal-black and shiny. I think it's an alpine bee.

So sometimes new things appear that you don't expect.

Anna Eder:
Yes, you already answered this somewhat earlier—about how the use of plant protection products, such as pesticides or herbicides, affects bees.
But you already said that you don't fertilize those areas and things like that, right?

Martin Punz:
We don't grow those types of crops here—my son doesn't grow them—but farmers who do have to be careful.

Johannes Punz:
I also think the law requires spraying only at night, when insects are resting.

Martin Punz:
Yes, that's only…

Johannes Punz:
Right next to the bee colonies there's actually a field. When we first had the bees, I observed it for a few years to see whether there would be any negative effects, because weeds still grow and bloom there and bees might fly there.
Honestly, I didn't notice anything negative.

Martin Punz:
You would have to test the honey to see whether anything is in it.

Johannes Punz:
But overall, we are careful.

Martin Punz:
Yes, we really don't have anything like that here.

Anna Eder:
Okay, very good.
And that brings us to the last question.
How important are bees, in your opinion, for sustainable agriculture in general?

Martin Punz:
They are the most important thing. Without pollination nothing works. Especially fruit farming—it wouldn't work at all anymore because wild bees have already become so much fewer.
That's a major problem now.

Because of modern field management and intensive agriculture, insect populations have decreased drastically.
If that doesn't change, it won't end well.
There are crops that rely completely on external pollinators—for example rapeseed. If nothing pollinates them, nothing grows and there's no yield. So they are extremely important.

Johannes Punz:
You don't want to reach the point where we end up like in China, where fruit trees have to be pollinated by hand.
It's about all of nature—the flowers. Every flower that isn't pollinated produces no seeds and can't reproduce. Eventually they would disappear.
It doesn't work without bees; it doesn't work without pollinators.
There are several insects that pollinate plants, but bees are incredibly important for nature overall.
Even if you don't count agriculture—just looking at nature in general—they are extremely important.
For us personally maybe not as much because we don't depend on them directly. But if you are a fruit farmer or work in greenhouses, you need them for strawberries and many other crops.
Without pollinators, humans wouldn't exist either.
If there are no fruits, there is nothing to eat.
So it's actually a very important topic.

Anna Eder:
Very good, then we have reached the end of the interview.
Thank you again for taking the time. I really enjoyed it, and this will help me a lot with my work.
Thank you.

Martin Punz & Johannes Punz:
Very good.