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Bee numbers in England fell by more than half over the last 20 years

England's bees are vanishing faster than anywhere else in Europe, with more than half of hives dying out over the last 20 years, according to a new study.

By Louise Gray, Environment Correspondent
Published: 7:00AM GMT 20 Jan 2010

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A honey bee worker collecting nectar from red clover flowers Photo: GETTY

The University of Reading research found there was a 54 per cent decline in managed honey bee populations in England between 1985 and 2005 compared to an average of 20 per cent across Europe.

It comes as separate research in France suggested the reason bee numbers are falling is because of intensive agriculture that has led to a fall in the number of wild flowers and plants.

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Dr Potts, from the University of Reading's School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, requested official data from 18 countries on honey bee colony numbers.

In England the bee population fell from 182,000 colonies in 1965 to 179,000 in 1985, to 83,000 today.

England had the most dramatic fall followed by Sweden, Germany and Austria. Scotland suffered a 15 per cent loss in the last two decades and Wales lost 23 per cent of colonies.

In recent years bee populations around the world have plummeted, with British bee keepers losing a fifth of hives over the winter of 2008/09. Experts blame everything from climate change, to pesticides or a mysterious ailment known as colony collapse disorder or CCD.

Dr Potts, who will be speaking on the subject in front of MPs this week, blamed the increased use of pesticides, bee disease such as the varroa mite and intensive agriculture.

He said it was extremely important to work out what is causing the decline in the bee population in England as every third bite we consume in our diet is dependent on a honeybee to pollinate the food.

"This is far worse than we expected," he said. "The big worry is we have more calls for the UK to produce its own food but many fruits and vegetables rely on pollinators."

Meanwhile, in a separate study, the National Institute of Agronomic Research in Avignon proved for the first time that a more diverse diet of different kinds of pollen can boost bee immunity.

This suggests that the monoculture used in today's intensive farming techniques may be contributing to the decline of the honey bee.

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