



**Location:** village of Kerasochori in the mountainous region of Evritania from April to September, N. Evia in October, area of Astakos, in Agrinio from November to March

**Company Name**

Honey Karani \_ nomadic beekeeping

**Date of Interview**

05/07/2021

**Contact Person**

Dimitra Karani

**Site**

<http://melikarani.gr/>

Dimitra Karani is a 29 years old woman who after her studies in nursery decided to take over her father's amateurish bee-keeping activity and turn it into a professional one, instead of being another unemployed young person. She runs an environmental friendly enterprise, as bee-keeping actually helps surrounding natural environment. Bees are of very high importance for natural ecosystems and even human life so, bee-keeping supports and preserves the valuable bee species. Dimitra grew up in the mountainous village of Kerasochori before she moved to Agrinio with her family. Surrounded by nature and her village community, never stopped visiting Kerasochori all these years. She loves a way of living in a small, mountainous place, despite all obstacles and difficulties this entails. Dimitra isn't what we would call an isolated or marginalized young person; however, she forms an inspiring example of how young people, even in most remote and marginalized areas, can think and act differently, can find what they really want to do and can follow their interests along with the devotion of a lot of hard working and personal effort. This is one of the main conclusions I keep from Dimitra's narration. Through her work she manages even to create few but important job opportunities for others. Her future plans are to be able to expand her business, to widen her market and, why not, if things turn out well, to stay permanently in Kerasochori.





Hi Dimitra, can you please tell me what triggered you in this business and describe what you do?

I run a nomadic beekeeping enterprise. I produce honey, royal jelly and pollen. This idea derives from the fact that my father was occupied in beekeeping, as an amateur not professionally, for almost 25 years. So, although I studied nursery, I decided to follow the beekeeping activity, continuing what my father started but, also, to take it a step further and turn it into a full-time profession, from which I now live on. I always liked my village (Kerasochori) and I like being in nature. I am in this field for four years now. Professional beekeeping requires mobility, for the honey production. So, from April to the end of September I stay at Kerasochori and I move the bees among several places (i.e. the villages of Krikelo, Fourná, etc.) in the area. In early spring I place the bees near the lake of Kremastón (where the pollen and royal jelly are produced). In October, I transfer the bees to N. Evia, where I place them among pine-trees. During all these months, that are called honey-bee months, I always keep the bees in the mountains. In winter, due to harsh climate in the Agrafa mountains I transfer the bees to lowlands, in the area of Agrinio, near the seaside town of Astakos. There, the weather is better and the bees are in comfort. Spring weather is what bees need in order to develop large populations and be productive and capable of collecting more honey in the following honey-bee months. Apart from knowing very well your bees you also need to develop very good knowledge on the natural environment. By this, I mean that you need to know what plants exist in each area. For example, in the lake of Kremastón there is spring heather and strawberry trees and no fir trees.

So, as I understand, depending on the type of honey you want to produce you choose a different variety of plants and trees.

Yes, exactly. And, also, the varieties depend on the seasonality. Therefore, after the lake I move the bees to the mountains (in Agrafa) in order to find the fir trees. But, also depending on the weather conditions, you may get honey or not, sometimes.

Oh, this sounds to hold a lot of uncertainty.

Yes, this is true. It is like gambling many times. So, to reduce uncertainty you need to know your bees and to be able to understand and read the plants and trees in the places you choose for the honey collection, which is also called *nomi*. For example, firs and oak trees are insult from a specific kind of bug, which you have to be able to see, to estimate its populations, to tell the level of hydration in the trees, etc. There is a lot to know. In order for the bees to collect the pollen, which is their bread actually, just as the honey is their food, I move them (in Agrafa) to places with oak and chestnut trees. Usually, near the village of Fourná. I should mention also, that all these places are in the Natura 2000 net. After spring, we enter the summer period which is as difficult as the winter, in terms of the survival of the bees. You need to take good care of them to survive heat, as well.





So, weather conditions are very important in beekeeping. Tell me more about it.

Yes, and the way that climate change affects weather, in the last years, is very negative for the bees, mainly because of the rapid weather changes (i.e. too cold and too hot periods). And, weather, is the only thing you can't control. For example, bees need around 28C in day and 12C in night and a relative hydration of 50%, in the environment. But, nowadays due to rapid weather changes there is high heat in day and because of this almost 32% hydration due to lack of rain and sometimes almost 2C in night. In order to protect the bees from the summer heat there are two choices: the lowlands and the very high altitudes.



Aren't the lowlands hotter in summer?

Yes, but the plains are being irrigated because of agriculture and this helps the bees to find plants and food there. However, due to the fact that farmers, in Greece, don't apply the relevant legislation, they keep using pesticides under no protection measures. Which is very harmful for the bees, of course. So, I choose the high altitudes, the alpine zone, over the fir trees zone, in order to avoid the heat.



Has climate change affected beekeeping in any other way? I am thinking of the forest fires, for example.

Yes, of course fires are a major threat. Also, another important issue is the wind-parks. Especially, here in the region of Agrafa, there are plans for the creation of wind-parks above 800m, which is not allowed by the European Law. These extensive wind-parks are going to destroy more than 2/3 of the places we rest our beehives.

That does sound very disappointing. Let's explore now how you achieved all these. How did you get all this knowledge around bees? I imagine that you had to read a lot, to attend seminars, some kind of school maybe? Was all this a result of individual or collaboration work?



First of all, you need to read a lot. So, I read a lot myself. About bees, their anatomy, their way of living and developing, their diseases, the different types of honey, etc. But, in order to really learn it you have to be taught from someone experienced in the field. Otherwise, pure theoretical knowledge won't help a lot in practice. Another difficulty is the collaborations with other beekeepers. You need to establish strong and lasting relations. I was lucky, because I learned some things from my father, at the beginning, and then from a very good friend of my family, who is professional beekeeper. Near him, in the field, for almost three years, I learned everything. I still collaborate with him, as well as with some other beekeepers. A few, but we have very good relations and this is necessary. I would say that beekeeping in Greece, is more like an art that is transferred from one generation to the other, empirically. And less, a formal educational field. So, yes, I am here now as a result of personal reading and learning and with a lot of help and training from a very good beekeeper, who is also a friend.



A seminar on beekeeping, let's say if organized in MIRC, would help?

Well, yes it could provide the basic knowledge. But practical experience, in the field, is more than necessary. If you try to directly apply theoretical knowledge without field experience you will fail, that's for sure.

Now, let's move to economic issues. What kind of monetary capital you need in order to start? How many bees you need to have in order to have a stable income? Where did you source your main support and resources? Did you get any funding?



Of course you need an initial amount of money to start. One beehive costs about 30euros. Plus, the workload you need to invest (or pay) to bring them in their final form. Also, each beehive entails 10 or 20 bee-frames (single or double). Each one of these costs about 10euros. So, you need 100euros for a bee-community of 10 bee-frames. When I say bee-community, I mean the queen, the female-workers and the male-bees, who work hard to cool the beehive. They aren't lazy as we usually think! In order to have a, relatively good income to be able to live on it (i.e. 700-800euros per month), you need to have about 250-300 productive beehives. Also, you need about 2,000euros for all necessary equipment. You need a small truck to transfer the bees (3,000euros for an old one or you can find someone to borrow from) but the highest cost is the petrol, in order to move the bees around. Also, during the first years you need to travel a lot to find places suitable for the bees, which entails an additional petrol cost. And, there is no relative funding/help for this cost, which is one of the highest for beekeepers. You also need a storage place, around 300sq.m. (at least), which either you rent or buy or have. Another important cost is the sugar with which we feed the bees in winter. We use sugar, honey, water and oregano-oil, mainly. So, for 200 beehives you need 4tn of sugar for the whole of winter (25kgs costs 14euros, so do the math!). Also, estimate about 40-50 new beehives each year (renewal of old ones). And, someone to help you for some days, who you also have to pay. I used all of my father's beehives and bought some more. I worked on restoring them on my own. I had a storage space from my family. I used some initial monetary capital from my family. Also, I used the honey my father had produced just before I started to work, I liquidated it and I put the money in the business (for all the expenses). I didn't use any funding programme and I am also very skeptical if I will use any now.

### Why not?



Because the commitment they ask for is highly discouraging. You receive almost 17,000euros (which is very little help) and you need to commit you won't do anything else for the next seven years. This is out of reality. In these times, such commitment is out of question. Who can guarantee I can run this business for the next seven years?

### How would you like a funding programme to be in order to be helpful?



It has to respond to real needs. It has to be close to our reality. Funding programmes are far from our problems, our everyday reality. People behind them should learn and come in contact with beekeeping in Greece. Which is different from France, Italy, or elsewhere. For example, they ask from a new, young beekeeper to start (from scratch) with 180 beehives. This is completely out of question. It simply can't be done. I managed to start this business because I had all this equipment and financial help of my family.

### You are already running your enterprise for four years. Do you consider it successful?



It is successful in terms that I can support myself. It went very well and through a very increasing rate until just before covid-19. However, the last year, because of covid-19, my income was restricted. This, because covid-19 affected the market chain, in general, so people buy less honey, because of their income restrictions. Also, tourism was very much restricted (to zero in some periods), so as a result the honey I used to sell in hotels was highly reduced. I saw reduction in my income and, mainly, as a result, I can't support any further investments on the business, at the moment.

What kind of difficulties did you meet when you started in this business? Also, did you have any particular difficulties or obstacles just because you are a woman?



Well, as I said I started in a rather protected environment, with people I knew. I know that there are very few, very successful women in the beekeeping business, in Greece. Yes, there are certain stereotypes about male and female roles, especially in the villages. But, if you are good on your work and professional on how you approach things, then you gain respect and full acceptance. I didn't expect it, at the beginning, but I didn't have any such difficulties or obstacles. Also, because communication with locals is very important to gain information about everything, I knew almost all in the village, since I half-grew up there. So, everything was smooth for me. When I had to find places in Evia, for the bees, again I approached people who knew my father and my friend-collaborator. So, it was also easy for me there. The difficulties, I would say, had mostly to do with all the unknown behind the enterprise, the stress whether I would succeed or not, the anxiety of starting something on my own.

Please describe me your selling and marketing procedures. How do you make your products known? Do you use any digital platforms, social media, etc.?



In Greece, there are two major companies who buy-sell honey. These buy wholesale from small producers and sell to supermarkets (mainly). I don't sell my products to them. I sell everything directly to certain markets, mainly in Athens, but also to several hotels in Evritania and other small businesses. I have a collaboration with a packer who packs my honey with my label "Honey Karani". I have a well-developed net of markets with hotels in Agrinio, Aigio, Kefalonia, Karpenisi, Evritania and with many bakeries, delicatessen-shops, groceries and some mini-markets in Athens. Hotels use the honey in breakfast and also in stands with local products. I don't sell in large supermarkets. Their prices aren't convenient for me, in terms of profit.

At the beginning, I had to receive ISO for my products (for the production and the packing), in order to be able to sell them. Which, of course, entailed an important cost that is transferred to the final product. In terms of marketing, I have a site where you can find my products, although it still needs work. I don't use social media, a lot, yet. Also, with a friend of mine, we made a promotion video, last year, but due to several obstacles it didn't work out.

A seminar on marketing would help you?



I think that one person can't know everything. I don't consider myself good on social media. A seminar would help me to have a general idea. However, I would invest on someone doing this professional. But, relevant knowledge would help me to have the overall control, yes.

Your future plans?



Well, I want to expand my bees-population and my market. I am thinking of adding some person also to help me, mainly in this part (the selling). It's difficult to run everything on your own. And, I would like to expand my market outside Greece, in the future.

Don't worry about this one. You will be well-known in all mountainous Europe, through PEAK, very soon! Ok, now I would like to discuss with you the social and economic dimensions of your enterprise in regard to your village and the locals. What is the impact of your business in this part?



Well, the first direct impact I can think of is that I am staying (and my family) in Kerasochori for almost seven months, each year. So, this contributes to local revitalization. Also, my products are sold to local hotels as well as to local cafes in my village, which entails some kind of profit for them too. Also, every time I need someone to help me in the work (usually the transfer of the beehives) I always ask (and pay) someone local from the village.

Do you think you inspire younger people in your village?



Yes, may be. Sometimes when they ask me about beekeeping I advise them to try it, along with their usual work and to be patient until they may live on this.

How can you describe your relations with local municipalities and communities? Did the local municipality help you, in any way, during the development of your idea?



Local communities and public authorities function in a very closed-circled relationship way (as usually in Greece, especially in mountainous areas). For example, if you know someone who works in the municipality you may take part in one of the running funding programmes. It is very rare for the municipality to approach young producers; you have to turn to them. You need to chase those people in order to get some kind of help (i.e. in marketing). No, I didn't receive any help when I initiated my enterprise.

Dimitra, I enjoyed our talk very much. And I learned things about bees I didn't know! Is there anything else you would like to say?



Yes, I would like to point out that primary sector, in Greece has many problems. Restrictions imposed, taxes and production procedures, the way they are all function, highly discourage young and small producers from joining in, and in beekeeping in specific. The way everything is, at the moment, encourages and benefits the large companies and producers. With everything that this entails for the quality of the products (she means the mass production) as well as for all these families of beekeepers who live on it. So, inevitably the small producers will find it very difficult to survive, if things don't change. I have a feeling that all those designing policies for agriculture, in general, and for beekeeping in specific, have no relation to it. They have no idea of the real costs involved. I bet they have never even been in a field. Just think, that those small producers who sell their honey to large companies get paid after 2,5 years!

However, you don't think to quit from beekeeping?



No, I won't quit. But, I feel that in the near future we will need more than one job to be able to live.

One more question. If you reach a point that you don't need to be in Athens for selling your products would you consider living in Kerasochori permanently?



Yes, I would return. If I could leave all the selling to someone else. Even now, during winter, I always spend one month in the village.

*That is really encouraging for mountains! Dimitra thank you very much! I am looking forward to our next meeting in Kerasochori and to taste your honey!*