

## Expert explains plight of the bumble bee

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The western bumble bee is one of a number of endangered pollinator species in B.C. that could be helped by the establishment of bee-friendly areas like the one being created near Bath Slough in east Richmond, says SFU expert Elizabeth Elle. Submitted photo

Bee colony collapses. A massive downturn in pollinator communities. The grinding to a halt of our ecosystem.

It's the stuff of disaster movies and the battle cry of environmental crusaders.

But what is the truth about the plight of pollinators? Are their numbers plummeting? And are we all doomed, as a result?

According to Elizabeth Elle, professor of community and evolutionary ecology at SFU, the situation is not as dire as some media reports would have you believe.

“We do rely on (bees) for a fair amount of our agricultural food production — one out of three bites you eat is thanks to a bee.

However, the idea that honey bee populations are declining in great numbers is incorrect, Elle said.

“They have remained quite stable, and in many parts of North America have actually increased,” she said.

That said, the honeybee is only one of 450 species of bees in B.C. and 200 or so in just the southern part of the province.

And some of those other species are in danger. Most notable is the western bumble bee, which used to be quite common in Richmond, but now is rare.

“The western bumble bee is facing some of the same challenges that are also faced by honeybees,” Elle said. “There’s an implication of disease. It’s hard to prove, there’s no smoking gun here. But they’ve also suffered habitat loss, and that combination seems to be why the western bumble bee is declining.”

That’s why projects to create bee-friendly habitats such as the one near Bath Slough in east Richmond can be beneficial.

“It can have a profound effect on pollinators,” Elle said. “Like any animal, a bee needs something to eat and a place to live. And that means flowers for food and a nesting place in the ground. The main thing we can do as individuals and communities to support declining pollinator populations is plant gardens.

“And if we provide bees with those resources, they are going to be able to survive even in urban areas — that’s the kicker here. Because unlike the situation with polar bears and their disappearing habitat, we can do something right in our neighbourhoods to support these really important insects.”

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