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EDITORIAL

## A Virus Among Honeybees

Last week, scientists reported having found a possible — emphasis on possible — cause of the collapse of honeybee populations reported in the past year. What is interesting isn't just the virus, called Israeli acute paralysis virus, but the use of new methods of genetic screening to determine what pathogens the bees in collapsed colonies had been exposed to. Researchers were able to quickly screen the DNA from all the organisms present in the bees and compare them with the DNA in genomic libraries, a catalog of known organisms. Bees from collapsed hives had the virus. Healthy bees did not.

Identifying this virus is only a first step in ascertaining the cause of colony collapse disorder, but it is a remarkable first step, a sign of how quickly new tools can be drawn from divergent scientific pursuits to track down and identify potentially global diseases.

Two other factors may also have played a role in this die-off. One is drought, which in some areas has affected the plants that bees draw nectar and pollen from. The other — still unproved — may be the commercial trucking of bees from crop to crop for pollination, a potential source of stress. These may have made bees more vulnerable to the effects of this virus.

In some ways, this newly reported research seems all the more important given all the speculation about what has been killing off the honeybees. These hive losses have inspired a kind of myth-making or magical thinking about their possible environmental origins. The suspected culprits include genetically modified crops and cellphones, to name only two.

Causation is a rigorous concept in science. It is vastly simpler in the popular imagination. Blaming cellphones and genetically modified crops for the death of bees is, mainly, a way of saying that we are worried — not only about the death of creatures both benign and beneficial to us, but also about technology's effect on our world. Causation, in the nonscientific sense, is just a way of organizing our worries.

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