

# Maasai women beekeepers in Tanzania

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In the small village of Ololosokwan, Maasai Honey educates and empowers local women through beekeeping. The women are taught colony management, how to manually press honeycomb and how to make products with beeswax. Sales from products directly support the beekeepers and their families and communities, while simultaneously supporting the local bees.



(above) Noorkisaruni holding a 500g jar of Maasai Honey

The village inhabitants are Maasai – semi-nomadic people with traditions in pastoralism. They are one of the most prominent tribes in Tanzania, well known for their cloth ‘shukas’ and beaded jewellery. Today the tribe is less nomadic and still maintains traditional clay houses that can be easily demolished or constructed when in search of new pastures. The homes tell the lifestyle: a central fire for cooking food and tea, leather hides for sleeping, and a small room for baby goats and sheep to stay at night. Women work at cooking food, caring for children, tending livestock and fetching water and firewood.

## Opportunities and income

Witnessing the challenging lifestyle of the women in Ololosokwan, Krysten Ericson (visiting Tanzania from Connecticut, USA) was motivated to help the Maasai women create work opportunities and earn income. The natural environment of the village inspired a beekeeping project: Maasai Honey was established, and apiaries were built across the village.

The new project was a learning process: a cautious beginning with a few wooden hives hanging in the trees, but the team wondered why the bees did not move in. At this point **Bees for Development’s Information Service** stepped in explaining that hives need to be baited with beeswax to attract bee colonies. Following this advice, the beekeeping process began, with **Bees for Development** providing many more foundation tips to help Maasai Honey to keep growing.

## Growing project

It is over ten years since those first few hives were hung. The project has grown immensely and now includes five apiary sites, one in each sub-village of Ololosokwan. In total, there are now almost 200 hives, distributed across the apiaries. Production, although variable depending on weather conditions, has increased steadily over the years. Last year we harvested over 1,200 kg of honey from these colonies. The project now includes hives of *Melipona* stingless bees. These bees produce a special honey known locally for its unique flavour and health benefits.

The environment of Ololosokwan makes beekeeping activities both interesting and challenging. There are great weather extremes shifting from harsh drought to powerful rain. Bees must be supplemented with food and water during the droughts when no flowers are present. Heavy rains can damage hives, overflow rivers, and alter the landscape. While bees are adaptive and resilient creatures, the apiaries require careful observation and monitoring. To protect the hives from wild animals and harsh weather, each Maasai Honey apiary has a bee cage. These cages act as housing structures to shelter the hives, while allowing the bees to fly freely. Maasai Honey women tend to the hives in their sub-village, working together with Maasai Honey beekeepers to manage the hive inspections and harvesting schedule.



*Nalari blends beeswax and oils to make skin salves. The team uses a double-boiling method to prevent the ingredients from overheating*

### Value addition

Once the honey is harvested, the women press and package the honey and then prepare the remaining beeswax. The women are trained in the making of candles, soap, skin salve and lip balm – value added products that add diversity and income. In this way, all parts of the harvested honeycomb are used, creating a zero-waste system that utilises renewable resources. For cosmetics production, other natural ingredients are sourced within East Africa, supporting regional value-chains and local businesses that produce natural, sustainable goods.

Products are sold to safari lodges, shops, and restaurants throughout Tanzania. Retail products may be sold to individuals, while honey in bulk quantities allows restaurants to use Maasai Honey in their culinary creations. The honey reaches many locations, but always carries the taste of the Serengeti and the distinct flavours of the acacia trees. The honey is never heated, only cold-pressed, ensuring that it retains both intrinsic flavours and natural health benefits. Like the environment it comes from, the honey is unique – telling its story to everyone who tastes it.

### Project pride

Maasai Honey prides themselves on the honey produced, and also the meaningful impact on the village. Many of the women testify that when they joined Maasai Honey, they had nothing, but the training and work opportunity has allowed them to provide for their families and send their children to school. Between the women, staff, and apiary guards, the project supports 26 Maasai Honey team members. The positive impacts are widespread, benefiting individuals

and the village economy and the community at large. Maasai Honey aims to continue growing, expanding sales and business opportunities so that profits can be reinvested back into the project. The journey of Maasai Honey has been an adventure, and without doubt, it is producing sweet returns.

*To learn more about Maasai Honey visit [www.MaasaiHoney.org](http://www.MaasaiHoney.org)*



*Nalari in the final steps of making lip balm pours the mixture into tubes*