

Almost 30,000 'citizen scientists' gather data to save bumblebees

Planting more flowers in cities could stop the decline of bees, say experts



A bumblebee visiting a lavender plant during the Big Bumblebee Discovery project in Britain. Photograph: EDF Energy

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Almost 30,000 people joined in a Big [Bumblebee](#) Discovery project over this summer, gathering large amounts of data to help scientists monitor these potentially endangered species.

This massive UK collaboration between “scientists-for-a-day” and environmental experts came to an end just eight days ago.

It will take months before it produces sound and verified results, but a preliminary analysis presented today at the British [Science Festival](#) indicates that cities are not as hostile to bumblebees as might be expected.



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Volunteers were asked to watch for the arrival of the bees at plantings of lavenders, record the time, location, weather and other details of their visit.

They then uploaded their observations on a website.



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The scientists randomly checked the validity of the sightings and found they were reliable and of high scientific standards.

Dr Helen Roy and Dr Michael Pocock from the [UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology](#) agreed one way to address the concern about global decline of bumblebee populations would be to plant more flower resources in cities.

They said lavender represented a flower-rich oasis and could support a large number of bumblebees in urban areas.

The two experts were enthusiastic about the involvement of the public in this large-scale experiment.

At the festival of science underway in Birmingham, they said it would change the way ecological data was collected and some scientific research was conducted.

Citizen science could involve a large number of participants, and yield large data at a low cost and very rapidly compared to traditional scientific approaches, they said.

In recent years, the Mammal Ecology group at [NUI Galway](#) has relied successfully on public input to track ranges of grey and red squirrels, dormice and in a current campaign Irish stoats.

Almost 500 sightings of bumblebees came from Northern Ireland for the bee project.

Ireland has 101 native bee species, including 20 bumblebee species.

One sub-variety (the *Bombus muscorum* var. *allenellus*) is unique, and can only be found on the Aran Islands.

Prof Michel Destrade is Head of Applied Mathematics at NUI Galway. He is currently at The Irish Times on placement as a [British Science Association](#) media fellow in association with Science Foundation Ireland