

What am I?

A Game Connecting Mathematics and the Environment

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Teacher's Guide: Primary level

Lesson 2: *Classification in Biology*

Introduction

In the last lesson, your students learned how to sort shapes according to their geometric properties. In this lesson, they will learn how biologists sort animals according to what they eat (or where they derive their energy). Knowing which animals and plants a particular animal depends on to survive can help scientists protect the animal and make sure that it is not harmed by human activities.

A food chain or food web is a diagram that shows which plants or animals are eaten by other animals in a particular habitat. There is a great deal of interesting mathematics in a food web, and understanding this mathematics will allow your students to comprehend in-depth how pollution, loss of habitat, and climate change harms plants and animals.

Tell your students that since they are now all experts at asking good questions to solve a puzzle, you will give them a chance to solve some puzzles about nature. Solving these puzzles will help them learn to think like scientists. And when they can think like scientists, they will be able to find out for themselves how their actions affect the environment, and they will see how much power they have to protect the plants and animals of the world.

Food Chains and Food Webs

As a warm-up activity, post a selection of animal cards from BLM 3: Animal and Plant Cards on the board and ask your students to discuss how they might sort the animals. In thinking about the properties of the animals, students might ask the following sorts of questions:

- Does the animal have legs? If so, how many?
- Does the animal have wings? If so, how many?
- How does the animal move? Does it run, crawl, swim, or fly?
- Where does the animal live?
- What type of body covering does it have?

After your students have had a chance to discuss these questions, remind them of one thing that all animals have in common: they must eat food to survive. Food gives animals the energy they need to grow, move, and reproduce.

Biologists are scientists who study animals and plants. Biologists can learn a great deal about an animal by finding out what kinds of things it eats.

Place the following animal cards on the board and draw arrows between them as shown:

Tree → Caterpillar → Robin → Great Horned Owl

(Note: In the diagram the animal names are arranged horizontally to save space. But you should place the cards on the board in a column, vertically, with the plant at the bottom. The cards are fairly small so you can create food chains that have a number of animals in them. Students at the back of the classroom may not be able to read the labels on the cards, but they should be able to recognize the animal on a card by its silhouette. To help students recognize the cards from a distance, let them see them up close first so they can become familiar with the names of the animals. You might want to laminate the cards so they are easier to use, and so you can reuse them).

Tell your students that the diagram you created is called a food chain. A food chain shows which plants or animals are eaten by the various animals in a habitat. In a food chain, the arrows always point from the food to the animal that eats the food. Leave the food chain on the board while your students help you with the following activity.

Place the cards below on the board in the order shown. Ask your students if they can arrange the cards in a column and create a food chain by drawing arrows to show which animals eat which food.

Question 2: **Duck Grasses Snowy Owl**
Answer: **Grasses → Duck → Snowy Owl**

Question 3: **Mouse Berry Bush Barn Owl**
Answer: **Berry Bush → Mouse → Barn Owl**

Ask your students whether the three food chains have anything in common. Students might notice that each chain starts with a plant and ends with an owl. Tell your students that many food chains end with animals that are not owls but very few start with an animal rather than a plant. Ask your students whether there could be a food chain where an animal is at the bottom and a plant appears above an animal. Your students may be surprised to learn that plants do sometimes eat animals! The venus fly trap, for instance, eats insects by trapping them in leaves that have long spines along their edges that form a cage when the leaf closes. Once the insect is trapped, the leaf releases a chemical that dissolves the insect, thus allowing the plant to digest its prey. (Students might do a research project on the types of plants that eat animals).

Tell your students that you put an owl at the top of each food chain for a reason. Scientists can learn a great deal about a habitat (a habitat is a place where animals live) by studying what owls eat. Owls eat a great variety of small animals, including insects, reptiles, birds, and mammals like mice and rabbits. Since owls don't have teeth, they can't chew their food the way we chew ours. Most birds that eat animals larger than insects, like hawks, shred their prey with their beaks, because this helps them digest the food. But some owls, like the barn owl, don't even do this: they swallow their prey whole! This means that owls usually digest less of what they eat than other birds. They regurgitate the parts of their prey they can't digest in balls called "owl pellets." If you pull open an owl pellet, you can sometimes find the entire skeleton of a mouse or a shrew inside. Because owls eat so many different kinds of animals, scientists can get a good idea of the types and numbers of animals that live in a particular habitat by examining the owl pellets.

Owls are amazing hunters. The barn owl, for instance, has special feathers that reduce the noise it makes when it flies so it can hover silently above its prey. It also has extremely acute hearing so it can hunt in the dark just by listening for the movements of its prey. (You might encourage your students to do a research project on owls and their importance in their habitats).

Ask your students if they think they can put together some food chains that are even longer than the ones that they previously tried. Can they put together a food chain that is four cards long? Or five long? (Don't underestimate how excited your students will become if you make it sound like creating longer and longer food chains is a great challenge. And give weaker students a chance to show off with these activities.

Research in psychology has shown that the brain only works efficiently when it is excited and engaged. Also, children need a great deal of practice to solidify concepts, so they enjoy practice more than adults. Don't be afraid to repeat similar activities in this lesson, giving lots of students a chance to participate).

Mix up the cards shown below and have students put them in order vertically, with arrows between.

Tree → Caterpillar → Frog → Barn Owl

Grasses → Grasshopper → Mouse → Snowy Owl

Berry Bush → Mouse → Snake → Great Horned Owl

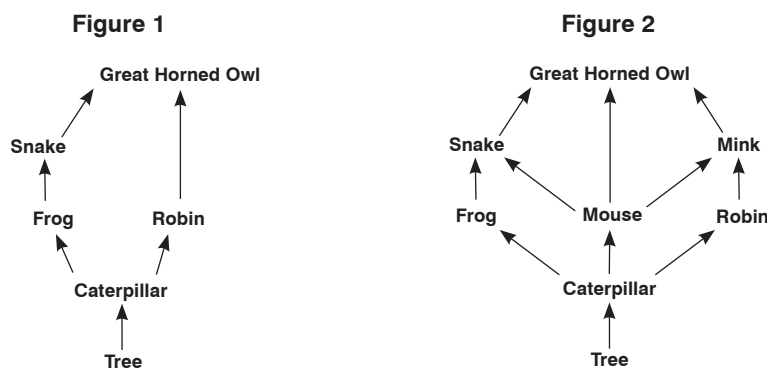
Flower → Butterfly → Dragonfly → Duck → Snowy Owl

Biologists call plants “producers” because they absorb the energy of the sun and store it in a form that animals can digest. Animals are called “consumers” because they use up or consume the energy that is stored in plants. In a food chain you can usually find two types of animals: animals that only eat plants, which are called herbivores; and animals that eat other animals, which are called carnivores. Since carnivores depend on herbivores to survive and herbivores eat plants, all animals (including humans) depend on plants to survive. That is why it is so important to protect the forests, meadows, and grasslands of the world and why it is important to grow plants in a way that doesn’t harm the environment.

Ask your students to identify the producers and consumers and the herbivores and carnivores in the food chains that they made.

After your students have practised making food chains, draw their attention to the first food chain that you made for the great horned owl. Explain to them that you are going to create a more complicated structure called a food web by adding animals to the food chain. Place the frog card on the board. Tell your students that there is an animal in the food chain that is eaten by the frog. Can they guess what it is? (The caterpillar) Add an arrow from the caterpillar to the frog. Then place the snake card on the board and add arrows to show that the frog is eaten by the snake and the snake by the owl (as shown in Figure 1). A diagram that includes several food chains is called a food web.

Place the mouse card on the board (between the frog and the robin) and ask how it might fit into the food web, and then repeat this exercise with the mink. The resulting food web is shown in Figure 2.



Tell your students that there is a great deal of interesting mathematics in the food web. Ask: What does the number of arrows that point away from a particular animal tell you? (How many animals in the web eat the animal) What does the number of arrow that point to the animal tell you? (How many animals are eaten by the animal) How many animals eat the caterpillar? (Three) How many animals are eaten by the great horned owl? (Three) Which two animals are eaten by the most animals? (The caterpillar and the mouse are both eaten by three animals) Ask a number of questions of this sort to give students a chance to demonstrate their understanding of the web. Note: If you feel that the food web in Figure 2 is too complex for your students, don't include the mink, or add it after students have practised with the simpler web.

Knowing how many arrows point to and away from an animal in a food web can tell you how important the animal is in a habitat. An animal with many arrows pointing away from it provides food for many other animals. And an animal with many arrows pointing towards it can perform an important function by controlling populations of animals that might otherwise become too numerous and destroy the habitat. Caterpillars, for instance, would kill a great many trees if they weren't eaten by the animals that are directly above them in the web. (Ask your students which animals in the web keep the population of caterpillars in check). But caterpillars are important themselves as they provide food directly or indirectly for so many other animals. In a natural habitat, all of the animals and plants play a role in maintaining the health of the habitat.

Another important mathematical feature of a food web is called a “path.” To find a path, start at one of the organisms on the web and move along any arrow in the direction in which it points. (You are not allowed to move backwards along an arrow; all paths lead upwards). If you follow a set of one or more arrows in a row, you will have found a path in the web. Ask a student to come to the board and show you a path from the

tree to the great horned owl. If they can reach, the student should put their finger on each animal or plant and say its name out loud as they move along the path. Ask another student to find a different path from the tree to the great horned owl. (Paths are considered different as long as one of the paths has at least one different organism on it, so paths that are different may still overlap. For instance, “tree, caterpillar, mouse, great horned owl” and “tree, caterpillar, mouse, mink, great horned owl” are different paths). Bonus: How many paths are there from the tree to the great horned owl altogether? (There are five; can you find them all?)

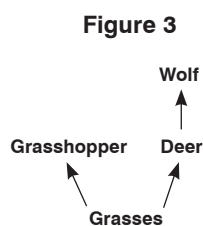
The length of a path is the number of organisms you encounter as you move along the path. For instance the path “caterpillar, robin, mink” has length 3, since there are 3 animals along the path. Ask students to count the length of several paths on the web. Then ask: How long is the longest path from the tree to the great horned owl? (There are four paths of length 5; for instance, tree, caterpillar, mouse, mink, great horned owl) How long is the shortest path? (There is one path of length 4; tree, frog, snake, great horned owl).

Ask your students to think about how paths might be important in a food web. If you follow all the paths that lead upwards from an organism, you will find all the animals that depend on the organism to survive. How many animals in the web depend on the mouse? (Three) How many depend on the frog? (Two: the snake and the great horned owl). What animal do all the other animals depend on? (The caterpillar) What plant do all the animals depend on? (The tree) You might point out to your students that the relations of interdependence in a habitat are even more complex than those they can see from the web. For instance, plants also depend on animals to survive: flowers, for instance, depend on bees to spread their pollen, and trees depend on animals like squirrels and chipmunks to spread their cones, nuts, and seeds.

From the web, students can begin to see how human activities affect the environment. They can see, for instance, how many animals are harmed when trees are cut down. They can also see how pollution and poisons spread through a habitat. Farmers spray pesticides on crops to control insects like caterpillars and grasshoppers. The chemicals in pesticides are stored directly in the body of an animal that eats the pesticide, but they are also stored in the body of a second animal that eats the first, and in the body of a third animal that eats the second, and so on. So the chemicals in pesticides, which can be harmful to humans as well as animals, work their way upward along any paths in the web. How many animals in the web are affected if a caterpillar eats the leaves from a tree that has been sprayed with pesticides? Your students should see that all of the animals are affected, because all of them can be reached from some path that starts from the caterpillar!

End the lesson by playing the game from the previous lesson but using the animal cards rather than the shape cards. Put a selection of animal cards on the board, arranged in a food web, and ask students to identify the animal you are thinking of by asking questions. Students should ask questions that are based on the food web and on the terms and concepts they learned in the lesson. For instance, if you use the food web for the great horned owl from Figure 2, they might ask: Are you thinking of a producer? A consumer? A herbivore? A carnivore? An animal that you can reach on a path from a robin? An animal that is eaten by three other animals? And so on.

As a warm-up game you might try using the food web below. One way to get to the answer quickly is to ask, “Are you thinking of a herbivore?” and then, if the answer is yes, “Are you eaten by a wolf?” and, if the answer is no, “Are you a producer?”



Tell your students that now that they understand some of the mathematics of food webs, they are ready to start applying their knowledge. In the next lesson they will revisit some ideas about food webs and learn about activities they can do at home and at school to help protect plants and animals.