

THE WEB OF LIFE

Activities involved in this ecology lesson plan:

- Research on ecology and symbolism
- Analytical thinking
- Creative thinking
- Composition

There have been recent reports about the alarming disappearance of honeybees nationwide. Beekeepers travel the country with their bees annually to pollinate more than \$14 billion worth of fruit, vegetable, and nut crops. In recent weeks, they have opened their hives to find them empty. They don't know whether the bees have been attacked by a fungus, mites, or a virus; whether their inner compass has failed so that they are getting lost when they leave their hives; or whether they have been overtaxed by the demands of their specialized job in the agricultural industry.

During the off season, beekeepers expect to lose up to 20 percent of their hives, but the percentages in California, Texas, and the East Coast have risen to 60 or 70 percent. Unless the bees "come back" on their own or scientists can find and eliminate the problem, the agricultural industry is facing a huge threat, and food prices will soar.

The bee, like the red wriggler, has a very important position in the "web of life," but we don't often think about them in this light. The red wriggler turns manures and decomposing fruits and vegetables into castings that have the fragrance of the forest floor. They not only eliminate smells and enrich the soil with their work, they may also play a role in disabling pathogens like *e coli*—although much more research must be done in this area.

In addition, these two creatures have an important symbolism to humanity. Earthworms are associated with “working old ground,” a matter of examining and “digesting” everything that has happened to us before we move in a new direction. The honey bee is associated with a sense of responsibility, hard work (“busy as a bee”), and community.

No matter how humble, every living creature has an important role in the web of life, and the following activity will enrich understanding of their importance.

Exercise:

1. Choose a creature—a bird, a reptile, an insect, an animal that has always interested you.
2. Research the creature's place in the grand scheme of things. What does it take from the environment? What does it give back? How does it contribute to balance? Do humans benefit from it direction, or is it the “idea” of the creature that is most important to us?
3. Come up with examples of a nursery rhyme, story, poem, fable, movie, etc., featuring this creature, and briefly describe the message or the impact.
4. Research the symbolism of the creature. Has it been “demonized” (i.e., the wolf, snake, spider, etc.)? What does it represent to us? How would it feel if this creature disappeared from the earth?
5. Write an essay on the chosen creature's importance to you personally and in the web of life.

