

Habitats: Prairies

(http://www.ccge.org/resources/learning_centre/classroom_activities/habitat_prairies.asp)

Connections to the curriculum:

Geography, science, art

Connections to the Canadian National Standards for Geography:

Environment and Society

Time:

One to two hours

Materials:

- Computer with Internet access
- Nature magazines (e.g., *Canadian Geographic*, National Geographic)
- Art materials: glue/paste, butcher paper, scissors, crayons, pencils, construction paper

Suggested Grade Level: K - 3

- Creative Climates
- Preserving Biodiversity

Overview

As a grassland ecosystem, the dominant vegetation of the prairie is grass. However, the diversity of plant and animal species is astounding, reaching beyond the well-known mammal species—bison and black-footed ferret—to the mountain plover, the tiger salamander, and countless grass and insect species. On an acre of prairie, there may be a million animals that eat grasses and/or other plants. In this lesson, students will use their prior and newly found knowledge to create their own vision of the prairie by creating a prairie ecosystem mural.

Objectives

Students will:

- identify the basic characteristics of the prairie ecosystem;
- identify several commonly known prairie species;
- create a classroom mural of a prairie ecosystem; and
- create reports about what they have learned.

Geographic Skills

- Asking Geographic Questions
- Acquiring Geographic Information
- Answering Geographic Questions

Suggested Procedure

Opening:

Tell students that for this activity, they will learn about the prairies, but first they need to review some basic concepts. Introduce or review the terms ecosystem (the set of interactions between living and nonliving things and their environment), community (a group of different organisms), and habitat (a place where an organism can meet its basic needs for food, water, shelter, and space to raise young).

Ask students what they think a prairie looks like. How is a prairie different from a forest? Show students the distribution of prairies in Western Canada. Do they live near a prairie?

Development:

Show students pictures of prairie ecosystems. Do the pictures look familiar? Have students seen places like this? The following web sites will be a good place to start:

[Canadian Geographic For Kids—CG Kids!](#)

[National Geographic: Geography Action! 2003—Prairies Photogallery](#)

NB: You might want to preview the first photo, which shows a prairie fire, to make sure it is appropriate for your class

[Enchanted Learning: Prairie Animal Printouts](#)

Hang a large piece of butcher paper along a long wall in the classroom. Have students draw a large prairie (with plants only) on butcher paper.

Have students choose a printout of a prairie animal to colour in, or draw and colour their own animal. Have them cut out (or help them cut out) their animal. Have each student take a turn presenting their animal. As a class, decide what kind of habitat it might live in on the prairie. Does it live in a burrow? Why, or why not? Does it fly? What kind of shelter might it need? Have students take turns placing their animal in an appropriate place on the mural.

Have students go through nature magazines or explore web sites to find pictures of prairies and their plants and animals. Share with them pictures of prairie animals and plants that you have gathered. How many different species can they see?

Closing:

Ask students if any of the prairie species they found live in their schoolyard. Could they? Take students out to the schoolyard as a group to see if any of the habitat needs of the species on students' murals could be met on the schoolyard. Is your schoolyard in a prairie, or formerly prairie, ecosystem? Explain that only some places can support this kind of ecosystem. Have students note any habitat elements that are present. If you do not live in a prairie area, ask students to identify the things that make the habitats available in your schoolyard different from the things prairie animals would need.

Suggested Student Assessment

Have students choose a prairie animal and create a "Prairie Animal Report" describing what their animal needs in its habitat, what components of that habitat are available in their schoolyard, the connections the animal has to other organisms (plants or animals) in its habitat, and what they would need to add to provide a suitable habitat for their animal. Did they notice any similarities between the habitat needs of many of the animals their classmates presented? You may want to group students and have them create and present their reports by type of animal (e.g. birds, mammals, reptiles).

[Note: This "report" can be a simple explanation of a student's drawing or a more involved presentation including written words and sentences, depending on the ages and abilities of the students.]

Extending the Lesson

Have students look at pictures of how prairie ecosystems have changed over the past 100 years. They may want to create a timeline with pictures or a mural depicting significant changes to the prairie (e.g., westward expansion or the development of agriculture).