Let the Cattail Out of the Bag!

Grade Level
K-6

Subject Areas
Earth, Physical, and Life Sciences

Duration
10 minutes to 1 hour

Setting
Classroom or outdoors

Skills
Observing, interpreting

Charting the Course
This activity provides an introduction to wetlands and can be used in conjunction with "Introducing Wetlands," p. 71. Follow this activity with activities that examine specific aspects of wetland soil, water, and plants. "Wetland Weirdos," for instance, takes a look at species adaptations.

Vocabulary
cattail, wetland

Summary

Students prepare for some of the sensory experiences they may encounter on a visit to a wetland when they explore a "touchy-feely" bag full of wetland objects.

Objectives

Students will become aware of some sensory qualities of wetland inhabitants.

Materials

Sample wetland artifacts are listed here; you can add your own, too. If there isn't a wetland nearby for collecting these items, you might find some through seafood markets, biological supply companies, local nature centers, or even a government agency that works with natural resources. Most staff members tend to collect odds and ends, which they may be willing to loan or donate.

- *a bag, such as an old pillowcase or sturdy paper bag*
- *cattail stalk and flower (fuzzy "hot dog" part)*
- *feather*
- *shell (clam, oyster, scallop, mussel)*
- *crab claw or dried shell*
- *wetland mud (in a baggie; smells like rotten eggs)*
- *turtle shell*
- *fur (small piece, pelt, or stuffed specimen—muskrats, beavers, and other mammals have fur)*
- *flower (wetlands have many beautiful ones; avoid endangered species)*
- *tap water (in a small container)*
- *leaves (grasses, wetland trees, etc.)*
- *a toy frog, fish, insect, duck, etc.*
- *snake skin*
- *bird's nest (only one that has fallen from a tree)*

Making Connections

Wetlands are full of fascinating plants, animals, and microscopic aquatic life. Students' curiosity about wetlands will be awakened when they feel the textures and shapes of special wetland objects. This hands-on learning game encourages an appreciation of the uniqueness of wetlands.

Background

Wetlands cover about six percent of the earth's surface. They can be found in every one of the United States and on all continents except Antarctica. They are found in rain forests, river deltas, coastal swamps, peatlands, salt pans, cranberry bogs, river estuaries, salt tidal flats, moist alpine tundra, and wet river bottom forests.

To be a wetland, an area must have three characteristics during most of the growing season: hydric (saturated) soils, water-tolerant plants, and enough water to either saturate the soil or cover the land to a shallow depth. A variety of plants and animals make their home in this unique environment, often with adaptations that help them thrive in wet conditions.

Procedure

Warm Up

Introduce wetlands to the class with the help of a colorful wetland poster (see Resources, p. 328).

The Activity

1. Call a volunteer to the front of the room. Blindfold the volunteer and ask her to reach into the bag and remove one object, or

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place one object in her hands. The object should be held out for the class to see. Younger students may need a reminder to put hands over mouths so they don't give away the object's identity.

2. Ask the volunteer to feel (and smell, if appropriate) the object, then describe her sensations to the class. Provide descriptive words to choose from if the volunteer needs help. The volunteer may then try to guess what the object is. If necessary, the class may help.

3. Remove the blindfold so the volunteer can see the object, then ask the class to locate it or something similar to it on the poster.

4. Repeat for several volunteers and objects.

Wrap Up

Ask students to review all of the objects they felt in the bag. Which ones were plants? Which ones were animals?

Ask students why they think the objects in the bag belong in a wetland. Would any one of the objects appear in a dry area? Why or why not? Do students have a wetland in their area, or have they ever been to one? Have them describe the wetland and the plants and animals found there.

Assessment

Have students:

- describe a wetland.
- identify plants and animals that live in a wetland.

Extensions

Go to a wetland near your school and have students create their own grab bag of one or two objects (avoid gathering endangered or rare species). Take the bags back to the classroom and ask them to "let the cattail out of the bag" with their classmates.

Have students lead each other on a blind walk in a wetland. Each blindfolded student should be led by a student who is not blindfolded. The seeing students present the blindfolded students with the sounds, smells, and tactile sensations wetlands provide.

Resources

Niering, William A. 1985. *Wetlands*. Audubon Society Nature Guides. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.