THE COYOTE AND THE SKUNK

A game illustrating defense mechanisms in the wild

GRADE 4

MATERIALS

- blindfold
- spray/mist bottle

KEY WORDS

- predator
- prey

STANDARDS

- SCI.4.3.3
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OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn that animals of different species interact with each other in several ways, one of which is to eat or be eaten by another animal.
- Students will see that predators usually take the old, weak, or sick members of a prey population, thereby keeping themselves and their prey species in top condition.
- Students will understand that without predators, numbers of prey animals would increase to the point of overpopulation. They might eventually starve to death or crowd out other species.
- Students will learn that while hunting animals (predators) have efficient methods to capture prey, the hunted animals (prey) have equally effective strategies to avoid capture.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Sharp claws, powerful beaks, deadly stingers, slashing teeth--all are weapons used by various predators, animals that hunt other animals for food. Besides these well-known physical characteristics, predators also rely on their speed, stealth, and sometimes elaborate disguises to aid in their search for food.
- Prey animals have developed equally numerous ways to avoid capture. Each prey species must have some defensive strategy against would-be predators or be wiped out completely. This, of course, would lead to a decrease in (and eventual elimination of) the predator species, as hunters would compete for fewer numbers of prey animals.

PROCEDURE

- Choose a fairly open, level site outdoors with a noisy walking area (i.e., dry leaves, plant litter, gravel, etc.) One member of the group is the prey (skunk). The others are the predators. The prey stands in the center of the noisy walking site blindfolded, holding spray bottle. (Ears should not be covered.) The predators (coyotes) form a circle around the prey. When everyone is ready, the prey starts spinning around while the predators walk on the perimeter of the circle. The prey yells “STOP” and everyone stops moving. The instructor will then choose one predator to stalk prey. The prey protects himself by listening for the sounds of the approaching predator and spraying that person with a spray bottle. The predator must pause between each step to see if the prey has pinpointed his position.
- The instructor must act as referee to determine a hit or miss with sprayer. “Hit” predators return to the perimeter of the circle. The prey has survived and can play again or become a predator. If the skunk sprays, but does not score a hit, the stalking coyote continues until the prey is tagged. If the prey is tagged, the stalking coyote may then become the skunk.

RECOMMENDED ASSESSMENT

- Lead a discussion with the students about the activity.