

# Glossary of Ecology Terms

**ABIOTIC** - a nonliving factor or element in an ecosystem (e.g., light, water, heat, rock, energy, mineral).

**ADAPTATION** - the development of physical and behavioral characteristics that allow organisms to survive and reproduce in their habitats.

**ADAPTIVE CHARACTERISTIC** - a characteristic (be it physical or behavioral) that allow an organism to survive and reproduce in its particular environment.

**BACTERIA** - microscopic, one-celled organisms.

**BIOME** - one of the largest recognizably distinct ecosystems on earth; the plant and animal communities and associated soils that are characteristic of a given regional climate type.

**BIOTIC** - living components of an ecosystem (e.g., trees, animals, insects, grass).

**CARNIVORE** - any organism that eats other consumers (sometimes referred to as "meat eaters").

**COMMUNITY** - a group of interdependent organisms of different species living in a habitat.

**COMPOST** - decomposed organic material that is produced when bacteria in soil break down garbage and biodegradable trash, making organic fertilizer.

**CONSUMER** - an organism that uses other organisms as a food source.

**CYCLE** - the series of steps in which non-living materials move through the environment.

**DECOMPOSER** - a living thing that breaks down dead organisms into simpler materials.

**DIVERSITY** - the number of kinds of living organisms in a given area.

**DREY** - the nest of a squirrel.

**ECOLOGY** - the study of how living things interact with each other and their environment.

**ECOSYSTEM** - (1.) the system of interactions between living and non-living things in an environment. (2.) a group of communities and their nonliving environment.

**ENVIRONMENT** - the living and non-living surroundings in which a plant or animal lives.

**EVAPORATION** - the process by which water becomes vapor in the atmosphere.

**FOOD CHAIN** - a sequence of organisms, including producers and consumers, through which energy moves in an ecosystem.

**FOOD WEB** - a system of interconnected food chains.

**FUNGUS** - Molds, mildews, yeasts, mushrooms and puffballs; a group of organisms that are lacking in chlorophyll and usually are non-mobile.

**HABITAT** - the place where an organism lives.

**HERBIVORE** - an organism that eats only plants.

**HUMUS** - brown or black, partially decomposed plant or animal material that forms the organic portion of soil.

**INHERITED TRAIT** - a characteristic that is passed from parents to offspring.

**LEARNED CHARACTERISTIC** - a behavior that is taught or acquired through experience.

**NICHE** - the role played by an organism in a community.

**OMNIVORE** - an organism that eats both plants and animals.

**ORGANISM** - a living thing, either plant or animal.

**MOLD** - a type of fungus that are often parasites on plants, animals, or even other fungi.

**PHOTOSYNTHESIS** - the process by which green plants use the energy from the sunlight to make food.

**POPULATION** - a community of individuals of the same plant or animal species that inhabit the same area, potentially interbreed, and share the same gene pool.

**PRECIPITATION** - general term for all kinds of falling moisture including rain, snow, sleet and hail.

**PREDATOR** - animals who live by hunting and preying on other animals for their own food supply.

**PREY** - animals that are killed and eaten by other animals.

**PRODUCER** - an organism that can produce food from sunlight through photosynthesis.

**SHELTER** - something that provides protection from weather or danger.

**SUCCESSION** - the orderly, gradual, and continuous replacement of one plant or animal community by another