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# OTHER DESERT DWELLERS

## PLANTS AND ANIMALS OF THE DESERT



### Activity Summary

In this activity, students will learn about some of the common plants and animals of the region. Students will learn the names of each plant or animal in three languages and study how each adapts to life in the desert. To help them learn about these desert dwellers, students will receive “Desert Dweller Cards” depicting the plants and animals and their life histories. Students will also explore the interrelationships between some of the animals and plants through a participatory activity.

#### Objectives

Students will:

- define and discuss the terms native and exotic.
- name and describe several common plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert.
- write and say the names of at least three common plants and animals in Spanish, Tohono O’odham, and English.
- describe two interrelationships among selected plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert.

#### Bringing it Together

The object of this activity is to remind students that there are other living creatures with whom we share this desert home. Just like us, these creatures must deal with the extreme conditions of heat, dryness, and high evaporation. Remind students how *they* feel on a hot desert day to introduce the environmental conditions to

#### Materials

- Desert Dweller Cards (Each card should be cut out on the dotted lines from the masters provided.)
- Student Journals

which the desert animals and plants have adapted. The plants and animals introduced in this activity each have unique ways for dealing with scarce water, extreme temperatures, and high evaporation. These plants and animals have also evolved together

as a community in the Sonoran Desert and have thus developed some fascinating interrelationships. Introducing these animals and plants of the desert in isolation of one another would be misleading to students. The life histories of the plants and animals are presented in a way that emphasizes the unique interrelationships between species. Also, as students study these organisms, encourage them to consider our own human interrelationships with the plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert.



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## Taking it Home and Other Extensions

As a class, go outside and discover the plants and animals of your schoolyard. Have students work in teams to investigate different areas of the playground. Students may take notes or draw pictures of their observations. Have the teams report their findings to the class. Which team saw more creatures? Where did they look? How many of the plants and animals from your Desert Dweller Cards were seen?

Think of other ways to study the plants and animals of your schoolyard. Is your schoolyard like the surrounding Sonoran Desert? How is it different? What plants and/or animals live there? Are they exotic or native? Do certain animals tend to occur in the schoolyard that don't seem to occur elsewhere (pigeons or grackles for example)? Is there an area where more animals and plants occur? What is different about that area?

You may decide to do a class Herbarium. In this case, live plants could be collected and pressed following teacher instructions and supervision.

Much of the information students can learn about desert plants and animals comes from their own personal observations while out "messing around in the desert."

Encourage students to further investigate their plant or animal or any other desert plant or animal on their own. Remind them that just by sitting and quietly observing, they may discover some amazing things about desert dwellers.

The "extensions" of this activity involve getting students outdoors for team discoveries focusing on life in the schoolyard. Sometimes, students may be disappointed at not seeing large, exciting animals. Yet, desert life is all around and by helping students focus on animals and plants that are easily seen, they can quickly become excited. Birds, for example, are everywhere, and most are easily identified with a field guide. Their behavior is fascinating and when students are given the time just to sit and watch, they can be awed. Insects are great creatures to observe as well; students can watch them close-up and easily interpret what "bugs" are doing. Even common "weeds" in the schoolyard can offer captivating natural history lessons. Take the time to try the extensions in this activity! Get students outdoors -- with a little guidance you will find that your students are natural at being naturalists!

## Activity Procedure

1) Begin this activity with a review of our neighbors in the Sonoran Desert - the other children of the desert. Who remembers who they are and where they live? Explain that in this exercise, the class will look at our other neighbors in the desert. Who might they be? -- The *plants and animals* with whom we share this desert home!

2) As a class, generate a list on the board of as many plants and animals "native" to the Sonoran Desert as students can name. If students include things like chicken or burro, list those but come back to them and explain that native means that the animal or plant originated in the desert and was not brought here by humans. Creatures such as chickens, burros, and mulberry trees were introduced into this area by humans and are thus called "exotic" or "introduced". Explain that this activity focuses on native plants and animals.

3) Choose a native animal or plant from the list and ask if anyone knows anything about it. Use some of the following questions to guide a discussion on the life history of several of the plants or animals from the list. The purpose of this discussion is to get students to focus not just on naming animals or plants but on how they live and what they do.

*How does it get its food?*

*Where does it grow?*

*Where does it make its nest or home?*

*What does it do when it gets hot?*

*What other plants or animals might it depend on for food, shelter, or other things?*

*Does anything eat it?*

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## Questions in the Student Journals:

*Write the name of your plant or animal (in English, Spanish, and O'odham).*

*Is your desert dweller a plant or animal?*

*What does your desert dweller eat (where does it get its energy)?*

*What does your desert dweller do when it gets real hot?*

*Name two other desert dwellers with whom your desert dweller has some sort of interrelationship.*

*Write down anything else unique about your desert dweller.*

*In your own words write three sentences about your desert dweller.*

### **Note:**

Students should keep their Desert Dweller cards handy. Have them color their cards and tape them in their Student Journals.

As students respond to such questions, commend their existing knowledge of their desert neighbors. Explain that next, you will all take a closer look at some of these plants and animals. As a class, you will learn how these desert dwellers survive in the desert environment as well as how each plant and animal interrelates with other plants and animals. An exciting part of this activity is that students will also learn the names of the plants and animals in three languages, Spanish, English, and Tohono O'odham. (Some Spanish and O'odham names were not available as of this printing!)

4) Hand out the "Desert Dweller Cards" one to a student (if you wish students may choose one of interest). Tell students that the card they picked is their plant or animal to study and learn more about and share with the rest of the class. Give them time to read the back of the cards (with the natural history information). Once they have read the cards, they should open their Student Journals to the Plants and Animals of the Sonoran Desert page and answer the questions about their desert dweller.

5) Choose a student to share information about his or her plant or animal. Have them read their journal entry about their desert dweller to the rest of the class. Remind the other students to listen very carefully. Instruct the student who is reading to again say the names of two plants or animals with whom it has some sort of interrelationship. Ask if someone else has the plant or animal named on their desert dweller card. When students raise their hands, have one of them read *their* sentences about their desert dweller and say the names of the two plants or animals with whom it interrelates. Continue this activity until everyone has shared their entries and found at least one other plant or animal with whom their desert dweller interrelates. Some students whose animal or plant is named may have already read their sentences to the class. In such cases, call on another student to share. Be sure to emphasize the importance of these interrelationships among plants and animals of the desert community.

6) After everyone has shared their plant or animal, give students some "free time" to move around the classroom and find people who have animals or plants which share some sort of interrelationship with *their* animal or plant. In the space provided in their Student Journals, students should draw their animal or plant with two other animals or plants. Remind students to write the names of the other animals and plants in Spanish, English, and O'odham next to their drawings.

