



What Lives in Soil?

Overview

This section introduces students to the animals that depend on soil. In addition to studying the animals students can see, introduce them to Earth's vast invisible life—the billions of microscopic organisms, such as bacteria, protozoa, fungi, and algae, which inhabit and enrich the soil. In a single spoonful of fertile soil there may be seven billion bacteria, five million protozoa, a million fungi, and one hundred thousand algae. That's more than the total number of people on Earth!

These tiny microorganisms, and larger visible animals, contribute to a whirl of interrelated activity that builds, enriches, and restructures the soil. Burrowing worms and mammals, such as moles, badgers, and prairie dogs, help keep the soil loose and crumbly and allow water to penetrate and circulate in the soil.



Loose soil, air, and water created by burrowing animals make it easier for plant roots to take hold and grow. Microscopic organisms decompose dead insects, larger animal matter, leaves, twigs, grass, and fallen trees. The rich organic humus that results enriches the soil for living organisms. Each organism is bound to the others in the intricate web of food chains, which ultimately depend on the soil.