



# The Web of Life

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All living things are united in a web of life. Each strand in this web is important. Each plant and animal has a job to do. Each living thing helps maintain the balance of nature and ensure the overall quality of life. All animals depend on plants for the air they breathe. When animals breathe out, they exhale a gas called carbon dioxide. In large amounts, this gas is poisonous to them. If it built up in the air, it would eventually kill them. But it doesn't build up. Instead, plants take the carbon dioxide from the air and use it to make food. In turn, they give off a gas called oxygen, which all animals need. In this way, plants and animals are interdependent. Working together, they maintain a balance that enables them both to survive.

Animals and people also depend on plants for the food they eat. A substance called chlorophyll enables the leaves of green plants to use solar energy, carbon dioxide, water, and organic nutrients from the soil to make sugars and starches. Stored in the leaves and stems of the plant, these sugars and starches nourish the plant so it can grow. They also nourish the many animals that eat plants and the wide variety of roots, leaves, fruits, and seeds that plants produce.

As animals digest their food, they produce wastes, parts of the food their bodies do not need or cannot use. If these wastes built up, they would create an unbearable stench and become a breeding ground for all sorts of disease-causing organisms. But they do not build up. Again, nature works to achieve a balance. Decomposers like mushrooms, carrion beetles, other insects, and worms feed on these wastes and transform them into nutrients plants can use. Thus, in nature, nothing is extra and nothing is wasted.

—From *Earthbook for Kids* by Linda Schwartz, page 106