

Too Close for Comfort

State Mandated Benchmarks and Standards

Grade Level: K-4

Subject Areas: Science, Environmental Education

Key Terms: crowding, disturbance, safety, behavior

Objectives

Students will (1) describe possible negative consequences for people and wildlife under conditions of crowding, and (2) identify ways people can behave in order to reduce negative consequences of crowding for wildlife.

Method

Students experiment with physical distance and levels of comfort in humans, estimate appropriate distances between humans and wildlife under various conditions, hypothesize about indicators of animal discomfort, and summarize reasons to avoid animal discomfort through crowding.

Materials

None

Background

Sometimes wildlife seems to want to say “Don’t get too close!” From a tree branch, a bird watches a person approaching; when the person gets too close, the bird takes flight.

Animals are often threatened when crowded by humans, even though the humans may mean no harm and may merely want to observe the animal. Animals may display their discomfort by fleeing, grinding their teeth, coiling, hissing, stomping their feet, snarling, coughing, or wolfing. Flight is the usual way animals show stress. Noises may come when an animal is ready or threatening to attack.

Wildlife photographers have learned that when the wildlife they are photographing begins to act strangely, they probably have gotten too close. Animals may run away if you are inside a certain distance. At a closer distance, they may charge or in other ways

respond aggressively to the threat of human presence.

One way to understand the way wildlife acts is to recognize that many animals have certain distances that they keep from their own kind. Wolves may demand large areas of range that no other wolf outside of their own pack (family) may enter. Studies show that certain kinds of finches always leave a certain distance between themselves when they perch on a telephone wire or fence line.

When crowding occurs, many animals react with bizarre, aggressive, or disordered behavior, and they may develop skin diseases like mange. They may adjust to the crowded conditions, over time, by ceasing reproduction.

In the United States, great blue heron rookeries (colonies of nesting sites) have been disturbed by the mere presence of people. Rookeries are the birds’ breeding grounds. Herons live most of the year alone; when they come together to breed, disturbances by humans during courtship and nesting can cause stress. Under circumstances of stress, they may not breed, may lay fewer eggs, or may abandon the rookery, leaving eggs or young birds to perish. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommends that nesting sites should be observed by humans at a distance of at least 660 feet to minimize disruption of the colony.

The purpose of this activity is for students to recognize the possible negative consequences for people and wildlife as a result of conditions caused by crowding. You may want to gather additional information from state or federal agencies concerning specific animals in your area.

Procedure

1. Introduce the concept of discomfort from crowding by asking one student to stand in front of the class. Approach the student slowly, asking the student to tell you when your closeness begins to make him or

her feel uncomfortable. Ask the class whether they allow strangers to approach them as close as they do their friends or family. How do they feel in the middle of strangers on a crowded bus or elevator? Discuss what physical reactions they have in crowded conditions, such as avoiding eye contact, nervousness, sweaty palms, and so on.

2. Introduce the idea that animals in the wild might also be uncomfortable when approached by strangers. Talk about why they might be uncomfortable (e.g., fear of predation, need to protect young). Discuss what other conditions might increase or decrease wariness such as whether it can fly away, climb quickly, run fast, or swim fast; what the animal's size is; whether the animal is alone or with a group; and whether it has a nest or has young.

3. Have the students hypothesize about animal behaviors that might indicate discomfort, such as foot stomping, teeth grinding, raising up on hind feet, nervously looking around, and eventually flying away.

4. Discuss the ways in which wildlife harassment might occur unintentionally, such as getting too close when photographing, hiking near a nesting site, and using loud vehicles near newborn animals or in places where animals are unaccustomed to humans. Explain the possibility that there are certain times of the year when some animals are more sensitive to intrusion, such as during their mating

season and during severe climatic conditions such as heavy winters or drought. How can communities minimize disturbances to wildlife? What can individual people do? Summarize reasons it is important to wildlife for people to minimize such disturbances.

5. Introduce to the students that humans can also force animals to become too close to each other, which also makes them uncomfortable.

6. Have the students stand in a large open area with a lot of room between each student, marked off with tape or chalk. Explain situations that may make their habitat shrink, such as human development, and draw a smaller area and have all of the students move to this smaller area. Explain that as the food in this area is eaten by all the animals, the area in which they can live gets even smaller. Draw a smaller area where the students will be very crowded and have them crowd in close to each other. Ask them how they would feel if they were forced to continually live like this.

Evaluation

1. Identify three examples of wildlife behavior that would indicate a human is too close.

2. Describe negative results of crowding on animals when a human is too close, and when animals are too close to one another.

3. Identify several special conditions or times of year when wildlife are more sensitive to intrusion.



Adapted from: Project Wild. Houston: Council for Environmental Education. 2005
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