

UNIT X

ECOLOGY

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Diversity is not only a characteristic of living organisms but also of content in biology textbooks. Biology is presented either as botany, zoology and microbiology or as classical and modern. The latter is a euphemism for molecular aspects of biology. Luckily we have many threads which weave the different areas of biological information into a unifying principle. Ecology is one such thread which gives us a holistic perspective to biology. The essence of biological understanding is to know how organisms, while remaining an individual, interact with other organisms and physical habitats as a group and hence behave like organised wholes, i.e., population, community, ecosystem or even as the whole biosphere. Ecology explains to us all this. A particular aspect of this is the study of anthropogenic environmental degradation and the socio-political issues it has raised. This unit describes as well as takes a critical view of the above aspects.





RAMDEO MISRA
(1908-1998)

Ramdeo Misra is revered as the Father of Ecology in India. Born on 26 August 1908, Ramdeo Misra obtained Ph.D in Ecology (1937) under Prof. W. H. Pearsall, FRS, from Leeds University in UK. He established teaching and research in ecology at the Department of Botany of the Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. His research laid the foundations for understanding of tropical communities and their succession, environmental responses of plant populations and productivity and nutrient cycling in tropical forest and grassland ecosystems. Misra formulated the first postgraduate course in ecology in India. Over 50 scholars obtained Ph. D degree under his supervision and moved on to other universities and research institutes to initiate ecology teaching and research across the country.

He was honoured with the Fellowships of the Indian National Science Academy and World Academy of Arts and Science, and the prestigious Sanjay Gandhi Award in Environment and Ecology. Due to his efforts, the Government of India established the National Committee for Environmental Planning and Coordination (1972) which, in later years, paved the way for the establishment of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (1984).

CHAPTER 13



ORGANISMS AND POPULATIONS

13.1 Organism and Its Environment

13.2 Populations

Our living world is fascinatingly diverse and amazingly complex. We can try to understand its complexity by investigating processes at various levels of biological organisation—macromolecules, cells, tissues, organs, individual organisms, population, communities, ecosystems and biomes. At any level of biological organisation we can ask two types of questions – for example, when we hear the bulbul singing early morning in the garden, we may ask – ‘How does the bird sing?’ Or, ‘Why does the bird sing?’ The ‘how-type’ questions seek the *mechanism* behind the process while the ‘why-type’ questions seek the *significance* of the process. For the first question in our example, the answer might be in terms of the operation of the voice box and the vibrating bone in the bird, whereas for the second question the answer may lie in the bird’s need to communicate with its mate during breeding season. When you observe nature around you with a scientific frame of mind you will certainly come up with many interesting questions of both types - *Why are night-blooming flowers generally white? How does the bee know which flower has nectar? Why does cactus have so many thorns? How does the chick spures recognise her own mother?*, and so on.

You have already learnt in previous classes that Ecology is a subject which studies the interactions among organisms and between the organism and its physical (abiotic) environment.

Ecology is basically concerned with four levels of biological organisation – organisms, populations, communities and biomes. In this chapter we explore ecology at organismic and population levels.

13.1 ORGANISM AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

Ecology at the organismic level is essentially physiological ecology which tries to understand how different organisms are adapted to their environments in terms of not only survival but also reproduction. You may have learnt in earlier classes how the rotation of our planet around the Sun and the tilt of its axis cause annual variations in the intensity and duration of temperature, resulting in distinct seasons. These variations together with annual variation in precipitation (remember precipitation includes both rain and snow) account for the formation of major biomes such as desert, rain forest and tundra (Figure 13.1).

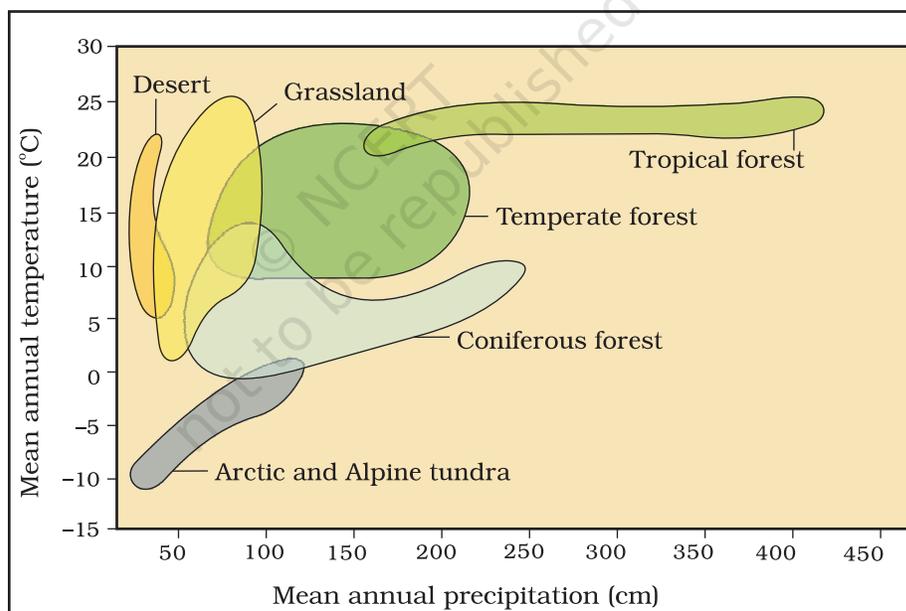


Figure 13.1 Biome distribution with respect to annual temperature and precipitation

Regional and local variations within each biome lead to the formation of a wide variety of habitats. Major biomes of India are shown in Figure 13.2. On planet Earth, life exists not just in a few favourable habitats but even in extreme and harsh habitats – scorching Rajasthan desert, rain-soaked Meghalaya forests, deep ocean trenches, torrential streams, permafrost (snow laden) polar regions, high mountain tops, thermal springs, and stinking compost pits, to name a few. Even our intestine is a unique habitat for hundreds of species of microbes.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 13.2 Major biomes of India : (a) Tropical rain forest; (b) Deciduous forest; (c) Desert; (d) Sea coast

What are the key elements that lead to so much variation in the physical and chemical conditions of different habitats? The most important ones are temperature, water, light and soil. We must remember that the physico-chemical (abiotic) components alone do not characterise the habitat of an organism completely; the habitat includes biotic components also – pathogens, parasites, predators and competitors – of the organism with which they interact constantly. We assume that over a period of time, the organism had through natural selection, evolved adaptations to optimise its survival and reproduction in its habitat.

Each organism has an invariably defined range of conditions that it can tolerate, diversity in the resources it utilises and a distinct functional role in the ecological system, all these together comprise its **niche**.

13.1.1 Major Abiotic Factors

Temperature: Temperature is the most important ecologically relevant environmental factor. You are aware that the average temperature on land varies seasonally, decreases progressively from the equator towards the poles and from plains to the mountain tops. It ranges from subzero levels in polar areas and high altitudes to $>50^{\circ}\text{C}$ in tropical deserts in summer. There are, however, unique habitats such as thermal springs and deep-sea hydrothermal vents where average temperatures exceed 100°C . It is general knowledge that mango trees do not and cannot grow

in temperate countries like Canada and Germany, snow leopards are not found in Kerala forests and tuna fish are rarely caught beyond tropical latitudes in the ocean. You can appreciate the significance of temperature to living organisms when you realise that it affects the kinetics of enzymes and through it the metabolic activity and other physiological functions of the organism. A few organisms can tolerate and thrive in a wide range of temperatures (they are called *eurythermal*), but, a vast majority of them are restricted to a narrow range of temperatures (such organisms are called *stenothermal*). The levels of thermal tolerance of different species determine to a large extent their geographical distribution. *Can you think of a few eurythermal and stenothermal animals and plants?*

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the gradually increasing average global temperatures (Chapter 16). *If this trend continues, would you expect the distributional range of some species to be affected?*

Water: Water is another the most important factor influencing the life of organisms. In fact, life on earth originated in water and is unsustainable without water. Its availability is so limited in deserts that only special adaptations make it possible for organisms to live there. The productivity and distribution of plants is also heavily dependent on water. You might think that organisms living in oceans, lakes and rivers should not face any water-related problems, but it is not true. For aquatic organisms the quality (chemical composition, pH) of water becomes important. The salt concentration (measured as salinity in parts per thousand), is less than 5 in inland waters, 30-35 in the sea and > 100 in some hypersaline lagoons. Some organisms are tolerant of a wide range of salinities (euryhaline) but others are restricted to a narrow range (stenohaline). Many freshwater animals cannot live for long in sea water and vice versa because of the osmotic problems, they would face.

Light: Since plants produce food through photosynthesis, a process which is only possible when sunlight is available as a source of energy, we can quickly understand the importance of light for living organisms, particularly autotrophs. Many species of small plants (herbs and shrubs) growing in forests are adapted to photosynthesise optimally under very low light conditions because they are constantly overshadowed by tall, canopied trees. Many plants are also dependent on sunlight to meet their photoperiodic requirement for flowering. For many animals too, light is important in that they use the diurnal and seasonal variations in light intensity and duration (photoperiod) as cues for timing their foraging, reproductive and migratory activities. The availability of light on land is closely linked with that of temperature since the sun is the source for both. But, deep (>500m) in the oceans, the environment is dark and its inhabitants are not aware of the existence of a celestial source of energy called Sun. *What, then is their source of energy?.* The spectral quality of solar radiation is also important for life. The UV component of the spectrum is harmful to many organisms while not all the colour components of the visible spectrum



are available for marine plants living at different depths of the ocean. *Among the red, green and brown algae that inhabit the sea, which is likely to be found in the deepest waters? Why?*

Soil: The nature and properties of soil in different places vary; it is dependent on the climate, the weathering process, whether soil is transported or sedimentary and how soil development occurred. Various characteristics of the soil such as soil composition, grain size and aggregation determine the percolation and water holding capacity of the soils. These characteristics along with parameters such as pH, mineral composition and topography determine to a large extent the vegetation in any area. This in turn dictates the type of animals that can be supported. Similarly, in the aquatic environment, the sediment-characteristics often determine the type of benthic animals that can thrive there.

13.1.2 Responses to Abiotic Factors

Having realised that the abiotic conditions of many habitats may vary drastically in time, we now ask—*how do the organisms living in such habitats cope or manage with stressful conditions?* But before attempting to answer this question, we should perhaps ask first why a highly variable external environment should bother organisms after all. One would expect that during the course of millions of years of their existence, many species would have evolved a relatively constant internal (within the body) environment that permits all biochemical reactions and physiological functions to proceed with maximal efficiency and thus, enhance the overall 'fitness' of the species. This constancy, for example, could be in terms of optimal temperature and osmotic concentration of body fluids. Ideally then, the organism should try to maintain the constancy of its internal environment (a process called *homeostasis*) despite varying external environmental conditions that tend to upset its homeostasis. Let us take an analogy to clarify this important concept. Suppose a person is able to perform his/her best when the temperature is 25°C and wishes to maintain it so, even when it is scorchingly hot or freezing cold outside. It could be achieved at home, in the car while travelling, and at workplace by using an air conditioner in summer and heater in winter. Then his/her performance would be always maximal regardless of the weather around him/her. Here the person's homeostasis is accomplished, not through physiological, but artificial means. *How do other living organisms cope with the situation?* Let us look at various possibilities (Figure 13.3).

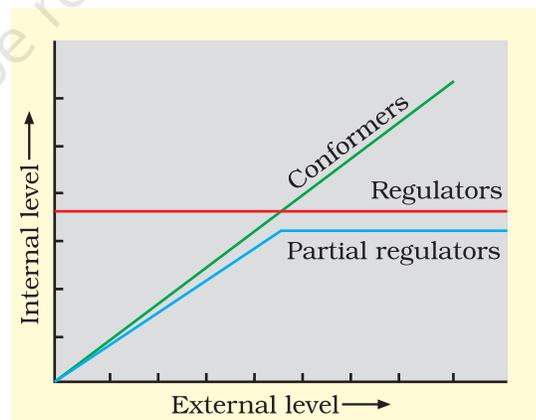


Figure 13.3 Diagrammatic representation of organismic response

- (i) **Regulate:** Some organisms are able to maintain homeostasis by physiological (sometimes behavioural also) means which ensures constant body temperature, constant osmotic concentration, etc. All birds and mammals, and a very few lower vertebrate and invertebrate species are indeed capable of such regulation (thermoregulation and osmoregulation). Evolutionary biologists believe that the 'success' of mammals is largely due to their ability to maintain a constant body temperature and thrive whether they live in Antarctica or in the Sahara desert.

The mechanisms used by most mammals to regulate their body temperature are similar to the ones that we humans use. We maintain a constant body temperature of 37°C . In summer, when outside temperature is more than our body temperature, we sweat profusely. The resulting evaporative cooling, similar to what happens with a desert cooler in operation, brings down the body temperature. In winter when the temperature is much lower than 37°C , we start to shiver, a kind of exercise which produces heat and raises the body temperature. Plants, on the other hand, do not have such mechanisms to maintain internal temperatures.

- (ii) **Conform:** An overwhelming majority (99 per cent) of animals and nearly all plants cannot maintain a constant internal environment. Their body temperature changes with the ambient temperature. In aquatic animals, the osmotic concentration of the body fluids change with that of the ambient air, water osmotic concentration. These animals and plants are simply conformers. Considering the benefits of a constant internal environment to the organism, we must ask why these conformers had not evolved to become regulators. Recall the human analogy we used above; much as they like, how many people can really afford an air conditioner? Many simply 'sweat it out' and resign themselves to suboptimal performance in hot summer months. Thermoregulation is energetically expensive for many organisms. This is particularly true for small animals like shrews and humming birds. Heat loss or heat gain is a function of surface area. Since small animals have a larger surface area relative to their volume, they tend to lose body heat very fast when it is cold outside; then they have to expend much energy to generate body heat through metabolism. This is the main reason why very small animals are rarely found in polar regions. During the course of evolution, the costs and benefits of maintaining a constant internal environment are taken into consideration. Some species have evolved the ability to regulate, but only over a limited range of environmental conditions, beyond which they simply conform.

If the stressful external conditions are localised or remain only for a short duration, the organism has two other alternatives for survival.



- (iii) **Migrate:** The organism can move away temporarily from the stressful habitat to a more hospitable area and return when stressful period is over. In human analogy, this strategy is like a person moving from Delhi to Shimla for the duration of summer. Many animals, particularly birds, during winter undertake long-distance migrations to more hospitable areas. Every winter the famous Keolado National Park (Bharatpur) in Rajasthan host thousands of migratory birds coming from Siberia and other extremely cold northern regions.
- (iv) **Suspend:** In bacteria, fungi and lower plants, various kinds of thick-walled spores are formed which help them to survive unfavourable conditions – these germinate on availability of suitable environment. In higher plants, seeds and some other vegetative reproductive structures serve as means to tide over periods of stress besides helping in dispersal – they germinate to form new plants under favourable moisture and temperature conditions. They do so by reducing their metabolic activity and going into a state of 'dormancy'.

In animals, the organism, if unable to migrate, might avoid the stress by escaping in time. The familiar case of bears going into *hibernation* during winter is an example of escape in time. Some snails and fish go into *aestivation* to avoid summer-related problems-heat and desiccation. Under unfavourable conditions many zooplankton species in lakes and ponds are known to enter *diapause*, a stage of suspended development.

13.1.3 Adaptations

While considering the various alternatives available to organisms for coping with extremes in their environment, we have seen that some are able to respond through certain physiological adjustments while others do so behaviourally (migrating temporarily to a less stressful habitat). These responses are also actually, their adaptations. So, we can say that **adaptation** is any attribute of the organism (morphological, physiological, behavioural) that enables the organism to survive and reproduce in its habitat. Many adaptations have evolved over a long evolutionary time and are genetically fixed. In the absence of an external source of water, the kangaroo rat in North American deserts is capable of meeting all its water requirements through its internal fat oxidation (in which water is a by product). It also has the ability to concentrate its urine so that minimal volume of water is used to remove excretory products.

Many desert plants have a thick cuticle on their leaf surfaces and have their stomata arranged in deep pits (sunken) to minimise water loss through transpiration. They also have a special photosynthetic pathway (CAM) that enables their stomata to remain closed during day time. Some desert plants like *Opuntia*, have no leaves – they are reduced to spines– and the photosynthetic function is taken over by the flattened stems.

Mammals from colder climates generally have shorter ears and limbs to minimise heat loss. (This is called the *Allen's Rule*.) In the polar seas aquatic mammals like seals have a thick layer of fat (blubber) below their skin that acts as an insulator and reduces loss of body heat.

Some organisms possess adaptations that are *physiological* which allow them to respond quickly to a stressful situation. If you had ever been to any high altitude place (>3,500m Rohtang Pass near Manali and Leh you must have experienced what is called *altitude sickness*. Its symptoms include nausea, fatigue and heart palpitations. This is because in the low atmospheric pressure of high altitudes, the body does not get enough oxygen. But, gradually you get acclimatised and stop experiencing altitude sickness. *How did your body solve this problem?* The body compensates low oxygen availability by increasing red blood cell production, decreasing the binding affinity of hemoglobin and by increasing breathing rate. *Many tribes live in the high altitude of Himalayas. Find out if they normally have a higher red blood cell count (or total hemoglobin) than people living in the plains.*

In most animals, the metabolic reactions and hence all the physiological functions proceed optimally in a narrow temperature range (in humans, it is 37°C). But there are microbes (archaeobacteria) that flourish in hot springs and deep sea hydrothermal vents where temperatures far exceed 100°C. How is this possible?

Many fish thrive in Antarctic waters where the temperature is always below zero. *How do they manage to prevent their body fluids from freezing?*

A large variety of marine invertebrates and fish live at great depths in the ocean where the pressure could be >100 times the normal atmospheric pressure that we experience. *How do they live under such high pressures and do they have any special enzymes?* Organisms living in such extreme environments show a fascinating array of biochemical adaptations.

Some organisms show behavioural responses to cope up with variations in their environment. Desert lizards lack the physiological ability that mammals have to deal with the high temperatures of their habitat, but manage to keep their body temperature fairly constant by behavioural means. They bask in the sun and absorb heat when their body temperature drops below the comfort zone, but move into shade when the ambient temperature starts increasing. Some species are capable of burrowing into the soil to hide and escape from the above-ground heat.

13.2 POPULATIONS

13.2.1 Population Attributes

In nature, we rarely find isolated, single individuals of any species; majority of them live in groups in a well defined geographical area, share or compete for similar resources, potentially interbreed and thus constitute a population. Although the term interbreeding implies sexual reproduction,



a group of individuals resulting from even asexual reproduction is also generally considered a population for the purpose of ecological studies. All the cormorants in a wetland, rats in an abandoned dwelling, teakwood trees in a forest tract, bacteria in a culture plate and lotus plants in a pond, are some examples of a population. In earlier chapters you have learnt that although an individual organism is the one that has to cope with a changed environment, it is at the population level that natural selection operates to evolve the desired traits. Population ecology is, therefore, an important area because it links ecology to population genetics and evolution.

A population has certain attributes whereas, an individual organism does not. An individual may have births and deaths, but a population has *birth rates* and *death rates*. In a population these rates refer to *per capita* births and deaths. The rates, hence, expressed are change in numbers (increase or decrease) with respect to members of the population. Here is an example. If in a pond there were 20 lotus plants last year and through reproduction 8 new plants are added, taking the current population to 28, we calculate the birth rate as $8/20 = 0.4$ offspring per lotus per year. If 4 individuals in a laboratory population of 40 fruitflies died during a specified time interval, say a week, the death rate in the population during that period is $4/40 = 0.1$ individuals per fruitfly per week.

Another attribute characteristic of a population is *sex ratio*. An individual is either a male or a female but a population has a sex ratio (e.g., 60 per cent of the population are females and 40 per cent males).

A population at any given time is composed of individuals of different ages. If the age distribution (per cent individuals of a given age or age group) is plotted for the population, the resulting structure is called an age pyramid (Figure 13.4). For human population, the age pyramids generally show age distribution of males and females in a diagram. The shape of the pyramids reflects the growth status of the population - (a) whether it is growing, (b) stable or (c) declining.

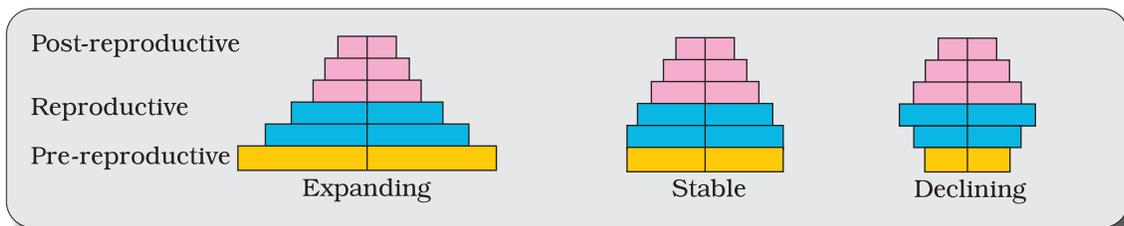


Figure 13.4 Representation of age pyramids for human population

The size of the population tells us a lot about its status in the habitat. Whatever ecological processes we wish to investigate in a population, be it the outcome of competition with another species, the impact of a

predator or the effect of a pesticide application, we always evaluate them in terms of any change in the population size. The size, in nature, could be as low as <10 (Siberian cranes at Bharatpur wetlands in any year) or go into millions (*Chlamydomonas* in a pond). Population size, technically called **population density** (designated as N), need not necessarily be measured in numbers only. Although total number is generally the most appropriate measure of population density, it is in some cases either meaningless or difficult to determine. In an area, if there are 200 carrot grass (*Parthenium hysterophorus*) plants but only a single huge banyan tree with a large canopy, stating that the population density of banyan is low relative to that of carrot grass amounts to underestimating the enormous role of the Banyan in that community. In such cases, the per cent cover or biomass is a more meaningful measure of the population size. Total number is again not an easily adoptable measure if the population is huge and counting is impossible or very time-consuming. *If you have a dense laboratory culture of bacteria in a petri dish what is the best measure to report its density?* Sometimes, for certain ecological investigations, there is no need to know the absolute population densities; relative densities serve the purpose equally well. For instance, the number of fish caught per trap is good enough measure of its total population density in the lake. We are mostly obliged to estimate population sizes indirectly, without actually counting them or seeing them. The tiger census in our national parks and tiger reserves is often based on pug marks and fecal pellets.

13.2.2 Population Growth

The size of a population for any species is not a static parameter. It keeps changing with time, depending on various factors including food availability, predation pressure and adverse weather. In fact, it is these changes in population density that give us some idea of what is happening to the population – whether it is flourishing or declining. Whatever might be the ultimate reasons, the density of a population in a given habitat during a given period, fluctuates due to changes in four basic processes, two of which (natality and immigration) contribute to an increase in population density and two (mortality and emigration) to a decrease.

- (i) **Natality** refers to the number of births during a given period in the population that are added to the initial density.
- (ii) **Mortality** is the number of deaths in the population during a given period.
- (iii) **Immigration** is the number of individuals of the same species that have come into the habitat from elsewhere during the time period under consideration.
- (iv) **Emigration** is the number of individuals of the population who left the habitat and gone elsewhere during the time period under consideration.

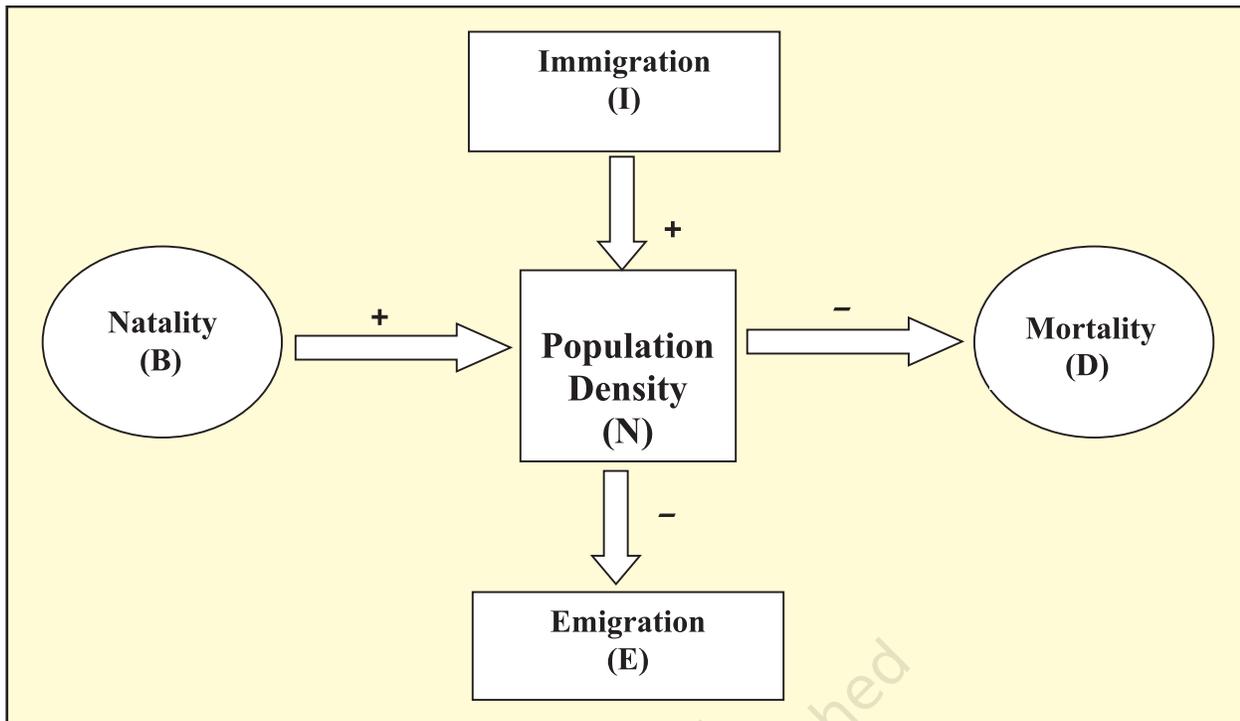


Figure 13.5

So, if N is the population density at time t , then its density at time $t + 1$ is

$$N_{t+1} = N_t + [(B + I) - (D + E)]$$

You can see from the above equation (Fig. 13.5) that population density will increase if the number of births plus the number of immigrants ($B + I$) is more than the number of deaths plus the number of emigrants ($D + E$). Under normal conditions, births and deaths are the most important factors influencing population density, the other two factors assuming importance only under special conditions. For instance, if a new habitat is just being colonised, immigration may contribute more significantly to population growth than birth rates.

Growth Models : Does the growth of a population with time show any specific and predictable pattern? We have been concerned about unbridled human population growth and problems created by it in our country and it is therefore natural for us to be curious if different animal populations in nature behave the same way or show some restraints on growth. Perhaps we can learn a lesson or two from nature on how to control population growth.

- (i) **Exponential growth** : Resource (food and space) availability is obviously essential for the unimpeded growth of a population. Ideally, when resources in the habitat are unlimited, each species has the ability to realise fully its innate potential to grow in number, as Darwin observed while developing his theory of natural selection. Then the population grows in an exponential or

geometric fashion. If in a population of size N , the birth rates (not total number but *per capita* births) are represented as b and death rates (again, *per capita* death rates) as d , then the increase or decrease in N during a unit time period t (dN/dt) will be

$$dN/dt = (b - d) \times N$$

Let $(b-d) = r$, then

$$dN/dt = rN$$

The r in this equation is called the 'intrinsic rate of natural increase' and is a very important parameter chosen for assessing impacts of any biotic or abiotic factor on population growth.

To give you some idea about the magnitude of r values, for the Norway rat the r is 0.015, and for the flour beetle it is 0.12. In 1981, the r value for human population in India was 0.0205. *Find out what the current r value is. For calculating it, you need to know the birth rates and death rates.*

The above equation describes the exponential or geometric growth pattern of a population (Figure 13.6) and results in a J-shaped curve when we plot N in relation to time. If you are familiar with basic

calculus, you can derive the integral form of the exponential growth equation as

$$N_t = N_0 e^{rt}$$

where

N_t = Population density after time t

N_0 = Population density at time zero

r = intrinsic rate of natural increase

e = the base of natural logarithms (2.71828)

Any species growing exponentially under unlimited resource conditions can reach enormous population densities in a short time. Darwin showed how even a slow growing animal like elephant could reach enormous numbers in the absence of checks. The following is an anecdote popularly narrated to demonstrate dramatically how fast a huge population could build up when growing exponentially.

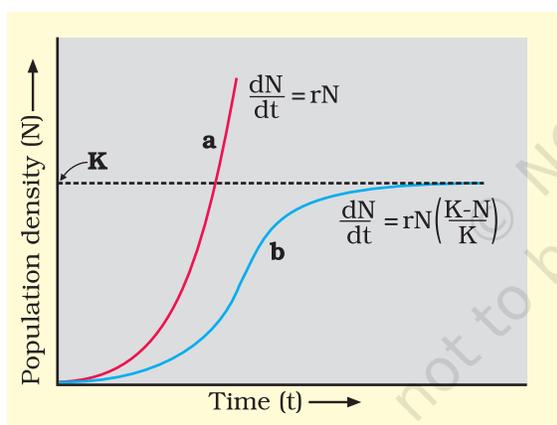


Figure 13.6 Population growth curve
a when responses are not limiting the growth, plot is exponential,
b when responses are limiting the growth, plot is logistic,
K is carrying capacity

The king and the minister sat for a chess game. The king, confident of winning the game, was ready to accept any bet proposed by the minister. The minister humbly said that if he won, he wanted only some wheat grains, the quantity of which is to be calculated by placing on the chess board one grain in Square 1, then two in Square 2, then four in Square 3, and eight in Square 4, and so on, doubling each time the previous quantity of wheat on the next square until all the 64 squares were filled. The king accepted the seemingly silly bet and started



the game, but unluckily for him, the minister won. The king felt that fulfilling the minister's bet was so easy. He started with a single grain on the first square and proceeded to fill the other squares following minister's suggested procedure, but by the time he covered half the chess board, the king realised to his dismay that all the wheat produced in his entire kingdom pooled together would still be inadequate to cover all the 64 squares. Now think of a tiny Paramecium starting with just one individual and through binary fission, doubling in numbers every day, and imagine what a mind-boggling population size it would reach in 64 days. (provided food and space remain unlimited)

- (ii) **Logistic growth:** No population of any species in nature has at its disposal unlimited resources to permit exponential growth. This leads to competition between individuals for limited resources. Eventually, the 'fittest' individual will survive and reproduce. The governments of many countries have also realised this fact and introduced various restraints with a view to limit human population growth. In nature, a given habitat has enough resources to support a maximum possible number, beyond which no further growth is possible. Let us call this limit as nature's *carrying capacity* (K) for that species in that habitat.

A population growing in a habitat with limited resources show initially a lag phase, followed by phases of acceleration and deceleration and finally an asymptote, when the population density reaches the carrying capacity. A plot of N in relation to time (t) results in a sigmoid curve. This type of population growth is called *Verhulst-Pearl Logistic Growth* (Figure 13.6) and is described by the following equation:

$$dN/dt = rN \left(\frac{K - N}{K} \right)$$

Where N = Population density at time t
 r = Intrinsic rate of natural increase
 K = Carrying capacity

Since resources for growth for most animal populations are finite and become limiting sooner or later, the logistic growth model is considered a more realistic one.

Gather from Government Census data the population figures for India for the last 100 years, plot them and check which growth pattern is evident.

13.2.3 Life History Variation

Populations evolve to maximise their reproductive fitness, also called Darwinian fitness (high r value), in the habitat in which they live. Under

a particular set of selection pressures, organisms evolve towards the most efficient reproductive strategy. Some organisms breed only once in their lifetime (Pacific salmon fish, bamboo) while others breed many times during their lifetime (most birds and mammals). Some produce a large number of small-sized offspring (Oysters, pelagic fishes) while others produce a small number of large-sized offspring (birds, mammals). So, which is desirable for maximising fitness? Ecologists suggest that life history traits of organisms have evolved in relation to the constraints imposed by the abiotic and biotic components of the habitat in which they live. Evolution of life history traits in different species is currently an important area of research being conducted by ecologists.

13.2.4 Population Interactions

Can you think of any natural habitat on earth that is inhabited just by a single species? There is no such habitat and such a situation is even inconceivable. For any species, the minimal requirement is one more species on which it can feed. Even a plant species, which makes its own food, cannot survive alone; it needs soil microbes to break down the organic matter in soil and return the inorganic nutrients for absorption. And then, how will the plant manage pollination without an animal agent? It is obvious that in nature, animals, plants and microbes do not and cannot live in isolation but interact in various ways to form a biological community. Even in minimal communities, many interactive linkages exist, although all may not be readily apparent.

Interspecific interactions arise from the interaction of populations of two different species. They could be beneficial, detrimental or neutral (neither harm nor benefit) to one of the species or both. Assigning a '+' sign for beneficial interaction, '-' sign for detrimental and 0 for neutral interaction, let us look at all the possible outcomes of interspecific interactions (Table 13.1).

Table 13.1 : Population Interactions

Species A	Species B	Name of Interaction
+	+	<i>Mutualism</i>
-	-	<i>Competition</i>
+	-	<i>Predation</i>
+	-	<i>Parasitism</i>
+	0	<i>Commensalism</i>
-	0	<i>Amensalism</i>

Both the species benefit in **mutualism** and both lose in **competition** in their interactions with each other. In both **parasitism** and **predation** only one species benefits (parasite and predator, respectively) and the interaction



is detrimental to the other species (host and prey, respectively). The interaction where one species is benefitted and the other is neither benefitted nor harmed is called **commensalism**. In **amensalism** on the other hand one species is harmed whereas the other is unaffected. Predation, parasitism and commensalism share a common characteristic– the interacting species live closely together.

- (i) **Predation:** *What would happen to all the energy fixed by autotrophic organisms if the community has no animals to eat the plants? You can think of predation as nature's way of transferring to higher trophic levels the energy fixed by plants. When we think of predator and prey, most probably it is the tiger and the deer that readily come to our mind, but a sparrow eating any seed is no less a predator. Although animals eating plants are categorised separately as herbivores, they are, in a broad ecological context, not very different from predators.*

Besides acting as 'conduits' for energy transfer across trophic levels, predators play other important roles. They keep prey populations under control. But for predators, prey species could achieve very high population densities and cause ecosystem instability. When certain exotic species are introduced into a geographical area, they become invasive and start spreading fast because the invaded land does not have its natural predators. The prickly pear cactus introduced into Australia in the early 1920's caused havoc by spreading rapidly into millions of hectares of rangeland. Finally, the invasive cactus was brought under control only after a cactus-feeding predator (a moth) from its natural habitat was introduced into the country. *Biological control* methods adopted in agricultural pest control are based on the ability of the predator to regulate prey population. Predators also help in maintaining species diversity in a community, by reducing the intensity of competition among competing prey species. In the rocky intertidal communities of the American Pacific Coast the starfish *Pisaster* is an important predator. In a field experiment, when all the starfish were removed from an enclosed intertidal area, more than 10 species of invertebrates became extinct within a year, because of inter-specific competition.

If a predator is too efficient and overexploits its prey, then the prey might become extinct and following it, the predator will also become extinct for lack of food. This is the reason why predators in nature are 'prudent'. Prey species have evolved various defenses to lessen the impact of predation. Some species of insects and frogs are cryptically-coloured (*camouflaged*) to avoid being detected easily by the predator. Some are poisonous and therefore avoided by the

predators. The Monarch butterfly is highly distasteful to its predator (bird) because of a special chemical present in its body. Interestingly, the butterfly acquires this chemical during its caterpillar stage by feeding on a poisonous weed.

For plants, herbivores are the predators. Nearly 25 per cent of all insects are known to be *phytophagous* (feeding on plant sap and other parts of plants). The problem is particularly severe for plants because, unlike animals, they cannot run away from their predators. Plants therefore have evolved an astonishing variety of morphological and chemical defences against herbivores. Thorns (*Acacia*, *Cactus*) are the most common morphological means of defence. Many plants produce and store chemicals that make the herbivore sick when they are eaten, inhibit feeding or digestion, disrupt its reproduction or even kill it. You must have seen the weed *Calotropis* growing in abandoned fields. The plant produces highly poisonous cardiac glycosides and that is why you never see any cattle or goats browsing on this plant. A wide variety of chemical substances that we extract from plants on a commercial scale (nicotine, caffeine, quinine, strychnine, opium, etc.) are produced by them actually as defences against grazers and browsers.

- (ii) **Competition:** When Darwin spoke of the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest in nature, he was convinced that interspecific competition is a potent force in organic evolution. It is generally believed that competition occurs when closely related species compete for the same resources that are limiting, but this is not entirely true. Firstly, totally unrelated species could also compete for the same resource. For instance, in some shallow South American lakes, visiting flamingoes and resident fishes compete for their common food, the zooplankton in the lake. Secondly, resources need not be limiting for competition to occur; in interference competition, the feeding efficiency of one species might be reduced due to the interfering and inhibitory presence of the other species, even if resources (food and space) are abundant. Therefore, competition is best defined as a process in which the fitness of one species (measured in terms of its 'r' the intrinsic rate of increase) is significantly lower in the presence of another species. It is relatively easy to demonstrate in laboratory experiments, as Gause and other experimental ecologists did, when resources are limited the competitively superior species will eventually eliminate the other species, but evidence for such competitive exclusion occurring in nature is not always conclusive. Strong and persuasive circumstantial evidence does exist however in some cases. The Abingdon tortoise in Galapagos Islands became extinct within a decade after goats were introduced on the island, apparently due to the greater browsing efficiency of the goats. Another evidence for



the occurrence of competition in nature comes from what is called 'competitive release'. A species whose distribution is restricted to a small geographical area because of the presence of a competitively superior species, is found to expand its distributional range dramatically when the competing species is experimentally removed. Connell's elegant field experiments showed that on the rocky sea coasts of Scotland, the larger and competitively superior barnacle *Balanus* dominates the intertidal area, and excludes the smaller barnacle *Chathamalus* from that zone. In general, herbivores and plants appear to be more adversely affected by competition than carnivores.

Gause's '*Competitive Exclusion Principle*' states that two closely related species competing for the same resources cannot co-exist indefinitely and the competitively inferior one will be eliminated eventually. This may be true if resources are limiting, but not otherwise. More recent studies do not support such gross generalisations about competition. While they do not rule out the occurrence of interspecific competition in nature, they point out that species facing competition might evolve mechanisms that promote co-existence rather than exclusion. One such mechanism is 'resource partitioning'. If two species compete for the same resource, they could avoid competition by choosing, for instance, different times for feeding or different foraging patterns. MacArthur showed that five closely related species of warblers living on the same tree were able to avoid competition and co-exist due to behavioural differences in their foraging activities.

- (iii) **Parasitism:** Considering that the parasitic mode of life ensures free lodging and meals, it is not surprising that parasitism has evolved in so many taxonomic groups from plants to higher vertebrates. Many parasites have evolved to be host-specific (they can parasitise only a single species of host) in such a way that both host and the parasite tend to co-evolve; that is, if the host evolves special mechanisms for rejecting or resisting the parasite, the parasite has to evolve mechanisms to counteract and neutralise them, in order to be successful with the same host species. In accordance with their life styles, parasites evolved special adaptations such as the loss of unnecessary sense organs, presence of adhesive organs or suckers to cling on to the host, loss of digestive system and high reproductive capacity. The life cycles of parasites are often complex, involving one or two intermediate hosts or vectors to facilitate parasitisation of its primary host. The human liver fluke (a trematode parasite) depends on two intermediate hosts (a snail and a fish) to complete its life cycle. The malarial parasite needs a

vector (mosquito) to spread to other hosts. Majority of the parasites harm the host; they may reduce the survival, growth and reproduction of the host and reduce its population density. They might render the host more vulnerable to predation by making it physically weak. *Do you believe that an ideal parasite should be able to thrive within the host without harming it? Then why didn't natural selection lead to the evolution of such totally harmless parasites?*

Parasites that feed on the external surface of the host organism are called *ectoparasites*. The most familiar examples of this group are the lice on humans and ticks on dogs. Many marine fish are infested with ectoparasitic copepods. *Cuscuta*, a parasitic plant that is commonly found growing on hedge plants, has lost its chlorophyll and leaves in the course of evolution. It derives its nutrition from the host plant which it parasitises. The female mosquito is not considered a parasite, although it needs our blood for reproduction. *Can you explain why?*

In contrast, *endoparasites* are those that live inside the host body at different sites (liver, kidney, lungs, red blood cells, etc.). The life cycles of endoparasites are more complex because of their extreme specialisation. Their morphological and anatomical features are greatly simplified while emphasising their reproductive potential.

Brood parasitism in birds is a fascinating example of parasitism in which the parasitic bird lays its eggs in the nest of its host and lets the host incubate them. During the course of evolution, the eggs of the parasitic bird have evolved to resemble the host's egg in size and colour to reduce the chances of the host bird detecting the foreign eggs and ejecting them from the nest. Try to follow the movements of the cuckoo (koel) and the crow in your neighborhood park during the breeding season (spring to summer) and watch brood parasitism in action.

- (iv) **Commensalism:** This is the interaction in which one species benefits and the other is neither harmed nor benefited. An orchid growing as an *epiphyte* on a mango branch, and barnacles growing on the back of a whale benefit while neither the mango tree nor the whale derives any apparent benefit. The cattle egret and grazing cattle in close association, a sight you are most likely to catch if you live in farmed rural areas, is a classic example of commensalism. The egrets always forage close to where the cattle are grazing because the cattle, as they move, stir up and flush out insects from the vegetation that otherwise might be difficult for the egrets to find and catch. Another example of commensalism is the interaction

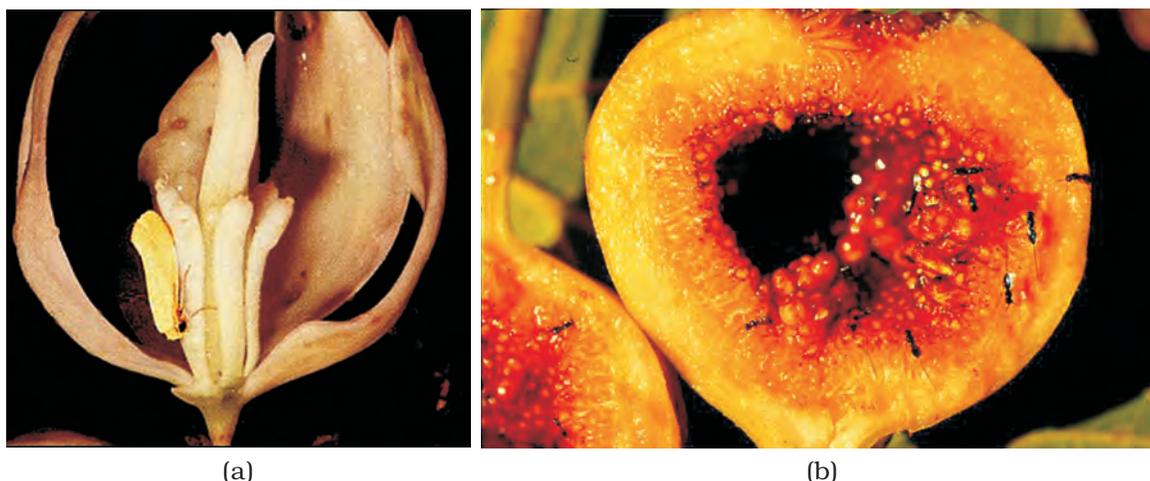


Figure 13.7 Mutual relationship between fig tree and wasp: (a) Fig flower is pollinated by wasp; (b) Wasp laying eggs in a fig fruit

between sea anemone that has stinging tentacles and the clown fish that lives among them. The fish gets protection from predators which stay away from the stinging tentacles. The anemone does not appear to derive any benefit by hosting the clown fish.

- (v) **Mutualism:** This interaction confers benefits on both the interacting species. Lichens represent an intimate mutualistic relationship between a fungus and photosynthesising algae or cyanobacteria. Similarly, the *mycorrhizae* are associations between fungi and the roots of higher plants. The fungi help the plant in the absorption of essential nutrients from the soil while the plant in turn provides the fungi with energy-yielding carbohydrates.

The most spectacular and evolutionarily fascinating examples of mutualism are found in plant-animal relationships. Plants need the help of animals for pollinating their flowers and dispersing their seeds. Animals obviously have to be paid 'fees' for the services that plants expect from them. Plants offer rewards or fees in the form of pollen and nectar for pollinators and juicy and nutritious fruits for seed dispersers. But the mutually beneficial system should also be safeguarded against 'cheaters', for example, animals that try to steal nectar without aiding in pollination. Now you can see why plant-animal interactions often involve *co-evolution* of the mutualists, that is, the evolutions of the flower and its pollinator species are tightly linked with one another. In many species of fig trees, there is a tight one-to-one relationship with the pollinator species of wasp (Figure 13.7). It means that a given fig species can be pollinated only by its 'partner' wasp species and no other species. The female wasp uses the fruit not only as an oviposition (egg-laying) site but uses the developing seeds within the fruit for nourishing



Figure 13.8 Showing bee-a pollinator on orchid flower

its larvae. The wasp pollinates the fig inflorescence while searching for suitable egg-laying sites. In return for the favour of pollination the fig offers the wasp some of its developing seeds, as food for the developing wasp larvae.

Orchids show a bewildering diversity of floral patterns many of which have evolved to attract the right pollinator insect (bees and bumblebees) and ensure guaranteed pollination by it (Figure 13.8). Not all orchids offer rewards. The Mediterranean orchid *Ophrys* employs 'sexual deceit' to get pollination done by a species of bee. One petal of its flower bears an uncanny resemblance to the female of the bee in size, colour and markings. The male bee is attracted to what it perceives as a female, 'pseudocopulates' with the flower, and during that process is dusted with pollen from the flower. When this same bee 'pseudocopulates' with another flower, it transfers pollen to it and thus, pollinates the flower. Here you can see how co-evolution

operates. If the female bee's colour patterns change even slightly for any reason during evolution, pollination success will be reduced unless the orchid flower co-evolves to maintain the resemblance of its petal to the female bee.

SUMMARY

As a branch of biology, Ecology is the study of the relationships of living organisms with the abiotic (physico-chemical factors) and biotic components (other species) of their environment. It is concerned with four levels of biological organisation—organisms, populations, communities and biomes.

Temperature, light, water and soil are the most important physical factors of the environment to which the organisms are adapted in various ways. Maintenance of a constant internal environment (*homeostasis*) by the organisms contributes to optimal performance, but only some organisms (regulators) are capable of homeostasis in the face of changing external environment. Others either partially regulate their internal environment or simply conform. A few other species have evolved adaptations to avoid unfavourable conditions in space (migration) or in time (aestivation, hibernation, and diapause).

Evolutionary changes through natural selection take place at the population level and hence, population ecology is an important area of ecology. A population is a group of individuals of a given species sharing or competing for similar resources in a defined geographical area. Populations have attributes that individual organisms do not—birth rates and death rates, sex ratio and age



distribution. The proportion of different age groups of males and females in a population is often presented graphically as age pyramid; its shape indicates whether a population is stationary, growing or declining.

Ecological effects of any factors on a population are generally reflected in its size (population density), which may be expressed in different ways (numbers, biomass, per cent cover, etc.) depending on the species.

Populations grow through births and immigration and decline through deaths and emigration. When resources are unlimited, the growth is usually exponential but when resources become progressively limiting, the growth pattern turns logistic. In either case, growth is ultimately limited by the carrying capacity of the environment. The intrinsic rate of natural increase (r) is a measure of the inherent potential of a population to grow.

In nature populations of different species in a habitat do not live in isolation but interact in many ways. Depending on the outcome, these interactions between two species are classified as competition (both species suffer), predation and parasitism (one benefits and the other suffers), commensalism (one benefits and the other is unaffected), amensalism (one is harmed, other unaffected) and mutualism (both species benefit). Predation is a very important process through which trophic energy transfer is facilitated and some predators help in controlling their prey populations. Plants have evolved diverse morphological and chemical defenses against herbivory. In competition, it is presumed that the superior competitor eliminates the inferior one (the Competitive Exclusion Principle), but many closely related species have evolved various mechanisms which facilitate their co-existence. Some of the most fascinating cases of mutualism in nature are seen in plant-pollinator interactions.

EXERCISES

1. How is diapause different from hibernation?
2. If a marine fish is placed in a fresh water aquarium, will the fish be able to survive? Why or why not?
3. Most living organisms cannot survive at temperature above 45°C. How are some microbes able to live in habitats with temperatures exceeding 100°C?
4. List the attributes that populations possess but not individuals.
5. If a population growing exponentially double in size in 3 years, what is the intrinsic rate of increase (r) of the population?
6. Name important defence mechanisms in plants against herbivory.

7. An orchid plant is growing on the branch of mango tree. How do you describe this interaction between the orchid and the mango tree?
 8. What is the ecological principle behind the biological control method of managing with pest insects?
 9. Distinguish between the following:
 - (a) Hibernation and Aestivation
 - (b) Ectotherms and Endotherms
 10. Write a short note on
 - (a) Adaptations of desert plants and animals
 - (b) Adaptations of plants to water scarcity
 - (c) Behavioural adaptations in animals
 - (d) Importance of light to plants
 - (e) Effect of temperature or water scarcity and the adaptations of animals.
 11. List the various abiotic environmental factors.
 12. Give an example for:
 - (a) An endothermic animal
 - (b) An ectothermic animal
 - (c) An organism of benthic zone
 13. Define population and community.
 14. Define the following terms and give one example for each:
 - (a) Commensalism
 - (b) Parasitism
 - (c) Camouflage
 - (d) Mutualism
 - (e) Interspecific competition
 15. With the help of suitable diagram describe the logistic population growth curve.
 16. Select the statement which explains best parasitism.
 - (a) One organism is benefited.
 - (b) Both the organisms are benefited.
 - (c) One organism is benefited, other is not affected.
 - (d) One organism is benefited, other is affected.
 17. List any three important characteristics of a population and explain.
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CHAPTER 14

ECOSYSTEM



14.1 Ecosystem-Structure and Function

14.2. Productivity

14.3 Decomposition

14.4 Energy Flow

14.5 Ecological Pyramids

14.6 Ecological Succession

14.7 Nutrient Cycling

14.8 Ecosystem Services

An ecosystem can be visualised as a functional unit of nature, where living organisms interact among themselves and also with the surrounding physical environment. Ecosystem varies greatly in size from a small pond to a large forest or a sea. Many ecologists regard the entire biosphere as a global ecosystem, as a composite of all local ecosystems on Earth. Since this system is too much big and complex to be studied at one time, it is convenient to divide it into two basic categories, namely the **terrestrial** and the **aquatic**. Forest, grassland and desert are some examples of terrestrial ecosystems; pond, lake, wetland, river and estuary are some examples of aquatic ecosystems. Crop fields and an aquarium may also be considered as man-made ecosystems.

We will first look at the structure of the ecosystem, in order to appreciate the input (productivity), transfer of energy (food chain/web, nutrient cycling) and the output (degradation and energy loss). We will also look at the relationships – cycles, chains, webs – that are created as a result of these energy flows within the system and their inter- relationship.

14.1 ECOSYSTEM – STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

In chapter 13, you have looked at the various components of the environment- abiotic and biotic. You studied how the individual biotic and abiotic factors affected each other and their surrounding. Let us look at these components in a more integrated manner and see how the flow of energy takes place within these components of the ecosystem.

Interaction of biotic and abiotic components result in a physical structure that is characteristic for each type of ecosystem. Identification and enumeration of plant and animal species of an ecosystem gives its species composition. Vertical distribution of different species occupying different levels is called **stratification**. For example, trees occupy top vertical strata or layer of a forest, shrubs the second and herbs and grasses occupy the bottom layers.

The components of the ecosystem are seen to function as a unit when you consider the following aspects:

- (i) Productivity;
- (ii) Decomposition;
- (iii) Energy flow; and
- (iv) Nutrient cycling.

To understand the ethos of an aquatic ecosystem let us take a small pond as an example. This is fairly a self-sustainable unit and rather simple example that explain even the complex interactions that exist in an aquatic ecosystem. A pond is a shallow water body in which all the above mentioned four basic components of an ecosystem are well exhibited. The abiotic component is the water with all the dissolved inorganic and organic substances and the rich soil deposit at the bottom of the pond. The solar input, the cycle of temperature, day-length and other climatic conditions regulate the rate of function of the entire pond. The autotrophic components include the phytoplankton, some algae and the floating, submerged and marginal plants found at the edges. The consumers are represented by the zooplankton, the free swimming and bottom dwelling forms. The decomposers are the fungi, bacteria and flagellates especially abundant in the bottom of the pond. This system performs all the functions of any ecosystem and of the biosphere as a whole, i.e., conversion of inorganic into organic material with the help of the radiant energy of the sun by the autotrophs; consumption of the autotrophs by heterotrophs; decomposition and mineralisation of the dead matter to release them back for reuse by the autotrophs, these event are repeated over and over again. There is unidirectional movement of energy towards the higher trophic levels and its dissipation and loss as heat to the environment.

14.2. PRODUCTIVITY

A constant input of solar energy is the basic requirement for any ecosystem to function and sustain. **Primary production** is defined as the amount of



biomass or organic matter produced per unit area over a time period by plants during photosynthesis. It is expressed in terms of weight (g m^{-2}) or energy (kcal m^{-2}). The rate of biomass production is called **productivity**. It is expressed in terms of $\text{g m}^{-2} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ or $(\text{kcal m}^{-2}) \text{ yr}^{-1}$ to compare the productivity of different ecosystems. It can be divided into gross primary productivity (GPP) and net primary productivity (NPP). **Gross primary productivity** of an ecosystem is the rate of production of organic matter during photosynthesis. A considerable amount of GPP is utilised by plants in respiration. Gross primary productivity minus respiration losses (R), is the **net primary productivity** (NPP).

$$\text{GPP} - \text{R} = \text{NPP}$$

Net primary productivity is the available biomass for the consumption to heterotrophs (herbivores and decomposers). **Secondary productivity** is defined as the rate of formation of new organic matter by consumers.

Primary productivity depends on the plant species inhabiting a particular area. It also depends on a variety of environmental factors, availability of nutrients and photosynthetic capacity of plants. Therefore, it varies in different types of ecosystems. The annual net primary productivity of the whole biosphere is approximately 170 billion tons (dry weight) of organic matter. Of this, despite occupying about 70 per cent of the surface, the productivity of the oceans are only 55 billion tons. Rest of course, is on land. *Discuss the main reason for the low productivity of ocean with your teacher.*

14.3 DECOMPOSITION

You may have heard of the earthworm being referred to as the farmer's 'friend'. This is so because they help in the breakdown of complex organic matter as well as in loosening of the soil. Similarly, decomposers break down complex organic matter into inorganic substances like carbon dioxide, water and nutrients and the process is called **decomposition**. Dead plant remains such as leaves, bark, flowers and dead remains of animals, including fecal matter, constitute **detritus**, which is the raw material for decomposition. The important steps in the process of decomposition are fragmentation, leaching, catabolism, humification and mineralisation.

Detritivores (e.g., earthworm) break down detritus into smaller particles. This process is called **fragmentation**. By the process of **leaching**, water-soluble inorganic nutrients go down into the soil horizon and get precipitated as unavailable salts. Bacterial and fungal enzymes degrade detritus into simpler inorganic substances. This process is called as **catabolism**.

It is important to note that all the above steps in decomposition operate simultaneously on the detritus (Figure 14.1). Humification and mineralisation occur during decomposition in the soil. **Humification** leads

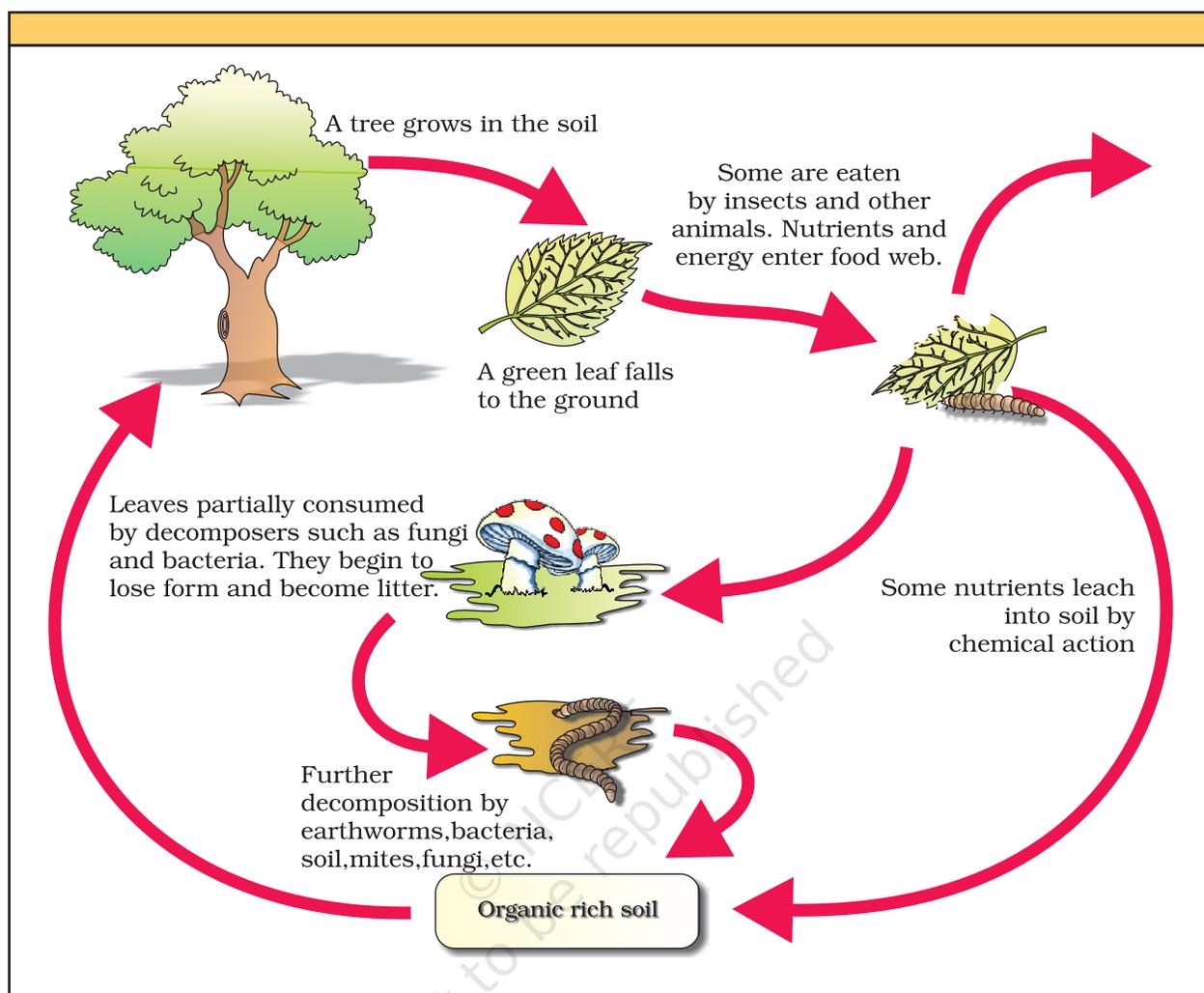


Figure 14.1 Diagrammatic representation of decomposition cycle in a terrestrial ecosystem

to accumulation of a dark coloured amorphous substance called **humus** that is highly resistant to microbial action and undergoes decomposition at an extremely slow rate. Being colloidal in nature it serves as a reservoir of nutrients. The humus is further degraded by some microbes and release of inorganic nutrients occur by the process known as **mineralisation**.

Decomposition is largely an oxygen-requiring process. The rate of decomposition is controlled by chemical composition of detritus and climatic factors. In a particular climatic condition, decomposition rate is slower if detritus is rich in lignin and chitin, and quicker, if detritus is rich in nitrogen and water-soluble substances like sugars. Temperature and soil moisture are the most important climatic factors that regulate decomposition through their effects on the activities of soil microbes. Warm and moist environment favour decomposition whereas low temperature and anaerobiosis inhibit decomposition resulting in build up of organic materials.



14.4 ENERGY FLOW

Except for the deep sea hydro-thermal ecosystem, sun is the only source of energy for all ecosystems on Earth. Of the incident solar radiation less than 50 per cent of it is **photosynthetically active radiation** (PAR). We know that plants and photosynthetic bacteria (autotrophs), fix Sun's radiant energy to make food from simple inorganic materials. Plants capture only 2-10 per cent of the PAR and this small amount of energy sustains the entire living world. So, it is very important to know how the solar energy captured by plants flows through different organisms of an ecosystem. All organisms are dependent for their food on producers, either directly or indirectly. So you find unidirectional flow of energy from the sun to producers and then to consumers. *Is this in keeping with the first law of thermodynamics?*

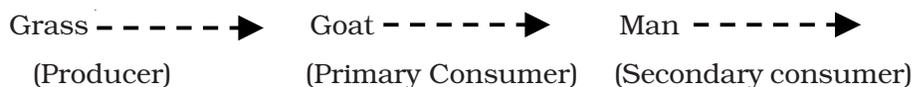
Further, ecosystems are not exempt from the Second Law of thermodynamics. They need a constant supply of energy to synthesise the molecules they require, to counteract the universal tendency toward increasing disorderliness.

The green plant in the ecosystem are called **producers**. In a terrestrial ecosystem, major producers are herbaceous and woody plants. Likewise, producers in an aquatic ecosystem are various species like phytoplankton, algae and higher plants.

You have read about the food chains and webs that exist in nature. Starting from the plants (or producers) food chains or rather webs are formed such that an animal feeds on a plant or on another animal and in turn is food for another. The chain or web is formed because of this interdependency. No energy that is trapped into an organism remains in it for ever. The energy trapped by the producer, hence, is either passed on to a consumer or the organism dies. Death of organism is the beginning of the detritus food chain/web.

All animals depend on plants (directly or indirectly) for their food needs. They are hence called **consumers** and also heterotrophs. If they feed on the producers, the plants, they are called primary consumers, and if the animals eat other animals which in turn eat the plants (or their produce) they are called secondary consumers. Likewise, you could have tertiary consumers too. Obviously the primary consumers will be **herbivores**. Some common herbivores are insects, birds and mammals in terrestrial ecosystem and molluscs in aquatic ecosystem.

The consumers that feed on these herbivores are carnivores, or more correctly **primary carnivores** (though secondary consumers). Those animals that depend on the primary carnivores for food are labelled **secondary carnivores**. A simple grazing food chain (GFC) is depicted below:



The **detritus food chain** (DFC) begins with dead organic matter. It is made up of **decomposers** which are heterotrophic organisms, mainly fungi and bacteria. They meet their energy and nutrient requirements by degrading dead organic matter or detritus. These are also known as **saprotrophs** (*sapro*: to decompose). Decomposers secrete digestive enzymes that breakdown dead and waste materials into simple, inorganic materials, which are subsequently absorbed by them.

In an aquatic ecosystem, GFC is the major conduit for energy flow. As against this, in a terrestrial ecosystem, a much larger fraction of energy flows through the detritus food chain than through the GFC. Detritus food chain may be connected with the grazing food chain at some levels: some of the organisms of DFC are prey to the GFC animals, and in a natural ecosystem, some animals like cockroaches, crows, etc., are omnivores. These natural interconnection of food chains make it a **food web**. *How would you classify human beings!*

Organisms occupy a place in the natural surroundings or in a community according to their feeding relationship with other organisms. Based on the source of their nutrition or food, organisms occupy a specific place in the food chain that is known as their **trophic level**. Producers belong to the first trophic level, herbivores (primary consumer) to the second and carnivores (secondary consumer) to the third (Figure 14.2).

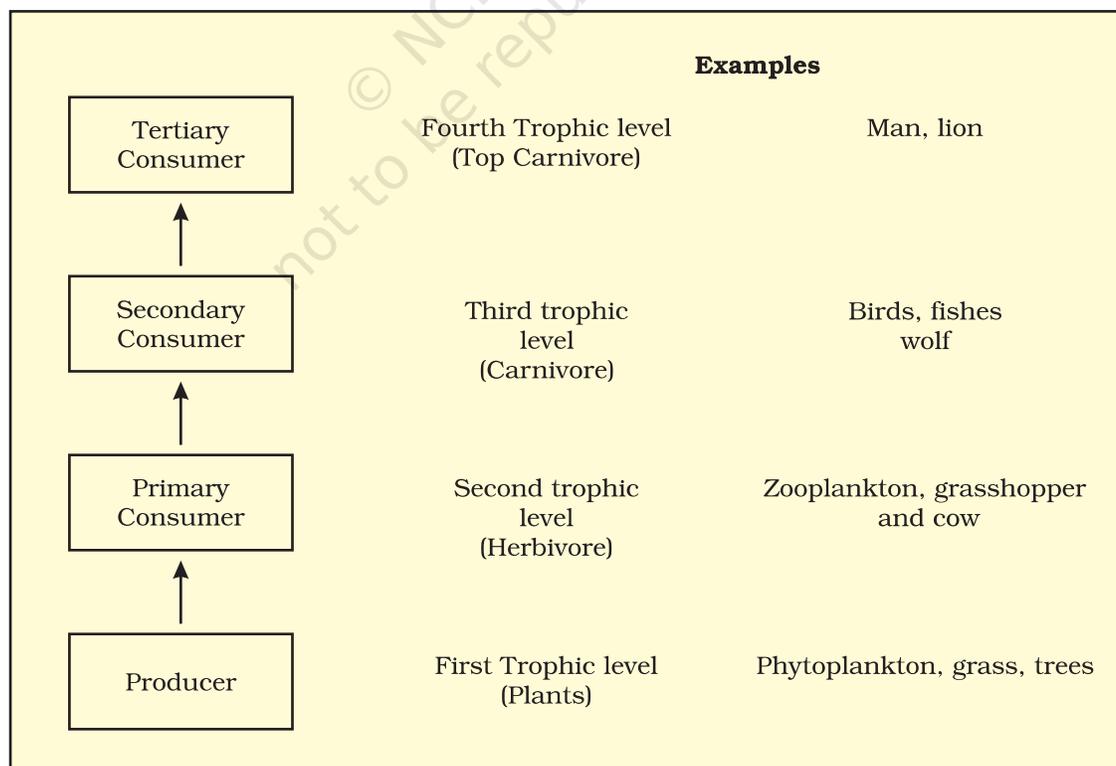


Figure 14.2 Diagrammatic representation of trophic levels in an ecosystem



The important point to note is that the amount of energy decreases at successive trophic levels. When any organism dies it is converted to detritus or dead biomass that serves as an energy source for decomposers. Organisms at each trophic level depend on those at the lower trophic level for their energy demands.

Each trophic level has a certain mass of living material at a particular time called as the **standing crop**. The standing crop is measured as the mass of living organisms (**biomass**) or the number in a unit area. The biomass of a species is expressed in terms of fresh or dry weight. Measurement of biomass in terms of dry weight is more accurate. *Why?*

The number of trophic levels in the grazing food chain is restricted as the transfer of energy follows 10 per cent law – only 10 per cent of the energy is transferred to each trophic level from the lower trophic level. In nature, it is possible to have so many levels – producer, herbivore, primary carnivore, secondary carnivore in the grazing food chain (Figure 14.3) . *Do you think there is any such limitation in a detritus food chain?*

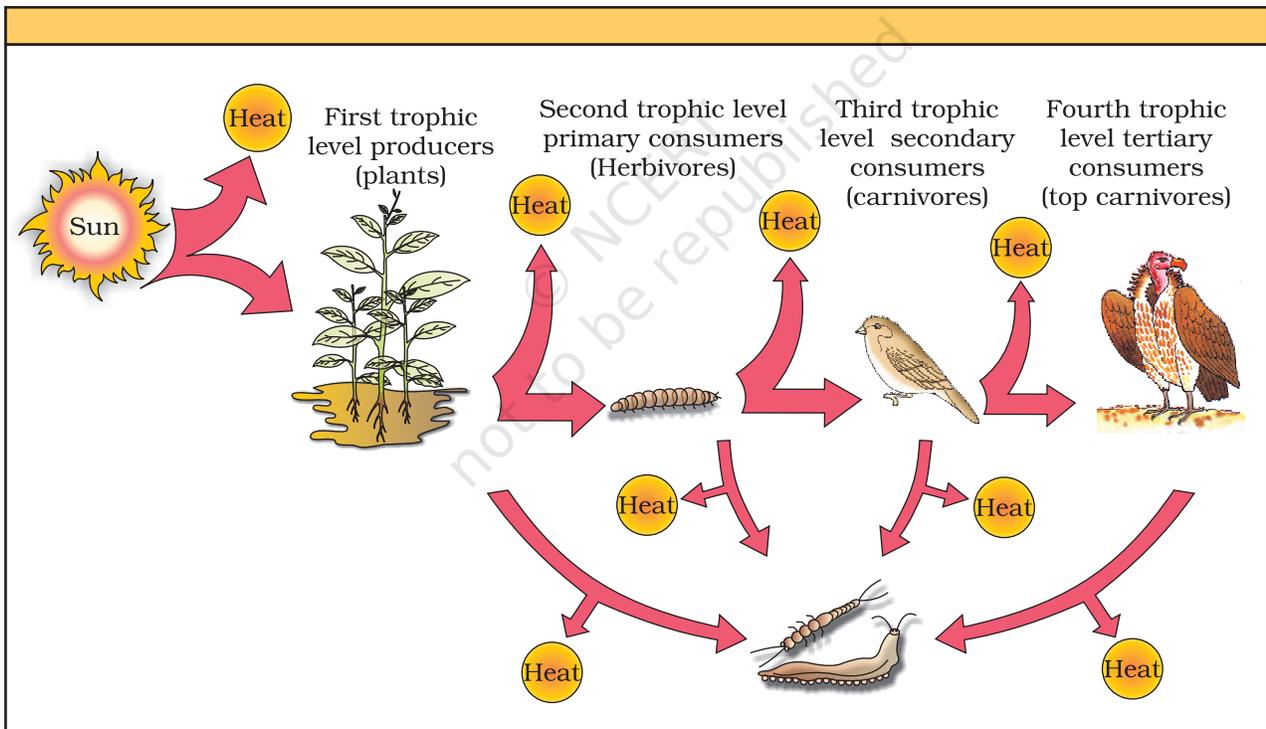


Figure 14.3 Energy flow through different trophic levels

14.5 ECOLOGICAL PYRAMIDS

You must be familiar with the shape of a pyramid. The base of a pyramid is broad and it narrows towards the apex. One gets a similar shape, whether you express the food or energy relationship between organisms

at different trophic levels. This, relationship is expressed in terms of number, biomass or energy. The base of each pyramid represents the producers or the first trophic level while the apex represents tertiary or top level consumer. The three types of ecological pyramids that are usually studied are (a) pyramid of number; (b) pyramid of biomass and (c) pyramid of energy. For detail (see Figure 14.4 a, b, c and d).

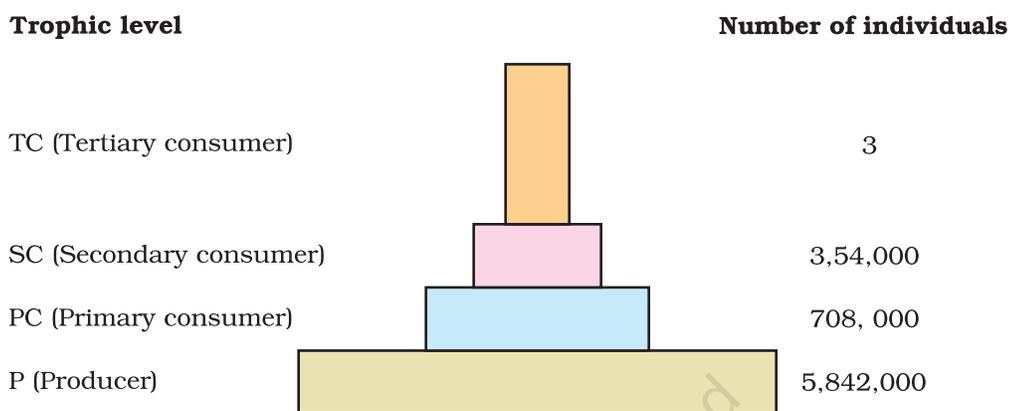


Figure 14.4 (a) Pyramid of numbers in a grassland ecosystem. Only three top-carnivores are supported in an ecosystem based on production of nearly 6 millions plants

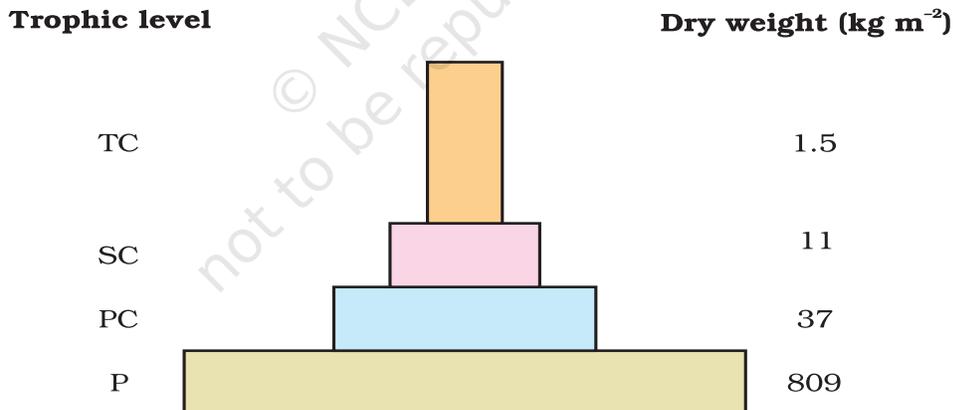


Figure 14.4 (b) Pyramid of biomass shows a sharp decrease in biomass at higher trophic levels

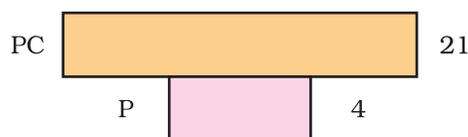


Figure 14.4 (c) Inverted pyramid of biomass-small standing crop of phytoplankton supports large standing crop of zooplankton

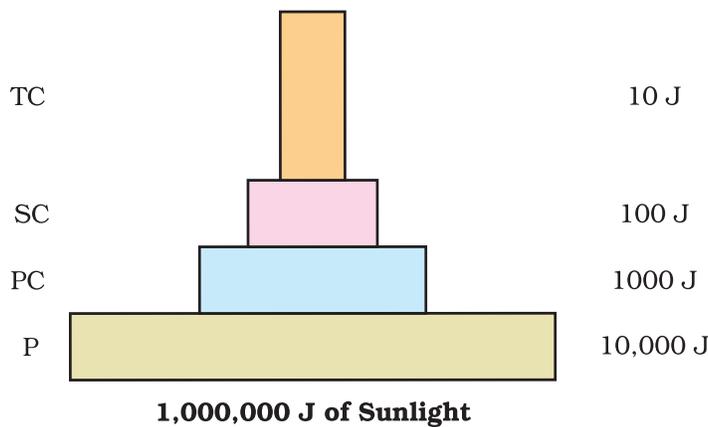


Figure 14.4 (d) An ideal pyramid of energy. Observe that primary producers convert only 1% of the energy in the sunlight available to them into NPP

Any calculations of energy content, biomass or numbers, has to include all organisms at that trophic level. No generalisations we make will be true if we take only a few individuals at any trophic level into account. Also a given organism may occupy more than one trophic level simultaneously. One must remember that the trophic level represents a functional level, not a species as such. A given species may occupy more than one trophic level in the same ecosystem at the same time; for example, a sparrow is a primary consumer when it eats seeds, fruits, peas, and a secondary consumer when it eats insects and worms. *Can you work out how many trophic levels human beings function at in a food chain?*

In most ecosystems, all the pyramids, of number, of energy and biomass are upright, i.e., producers are more in number and biomass than the herbivores, and herbivores are more in number and biomass than the carnivores. Also energy at a lower trophic level is always more than at a higher level.

There are exceptions to this generalisation: If you were to count the number of insects feeding on a big tree what kind of pyramid would you get? Now add an estimate of the number of small birds depending on the insects, as also the number of larger birds eating the smaller. Draw the shape you would get.

The pyramid of biomass in sea is generally inverted because the biomass of fishes far exceeds that of phytoplankton. *Isn't that a paradox? How would you explain this?*

Pyramid of energy is always upright, can never be inverted, because when energy flows from a particular trophic level to the next trophic level, some energy is always lost as heat at each step. Each bar in the energy pyramid indicates the amount of energy present at each trophic level in a given time or annually per unit area.



However, there are certain limitations of ecological pyramids such as it does not take into account the same species belonging to two or more trophic levels. It assumes a simple food chain, something that almost never exists in nature; it does not accommodate a food web. Moreover, saprophytes are not given any place in ecological pyramids even though they play a vital role in the ecosystem.

14.6 ECOLOGICAL SUCCESSION

You have learnt in Chapter 13, the characteristics of population and community and also their response to environment and how such responses vary from an individual response. Let us examine another aspect of community response to environment over time.

An important characteristic of all communities is that their composition and structure constantly change in response to the changing environmental conditions. This change is orderly and sequential, parallel with the changes in the physical environment. These changes lead finally to a community that is in near equilibrium with the environment and that is called a **climax community**. The gradual and fairly predictable change in the species composition of a given area is called **ecological succession**. During succession some species colonise an area and their population become more numerous whereas populations of other species decline and even disappear.

The entire sequence of communities that successively change in a given area are called **seres(s)**. The individual transitional communities are termed seral stages or seral communities. In the successive seral stages there is a change in the diversity of species of organisms, increase in the number of species and organisms as well as an increase in the total biomass.

The present day communities in the world have come to be because of succession that has occurred over millions of years since life started on earth. Actually succession and evolution would have been parallel processes at that time.

Succession is hence a process that starts in an area where no living organisms are there – these could be areas where no living organisms ever existed, say bare rock; or in areas that somehow, lost all the living organisms that existed there. The former is called primary succession, while the latter is termed secondary succession.

Examples of areas where primary succession occurs are newly cooled lava, bare rock, newly created pond or reservoir. The establishment of a new biotic community is generally slow. Before a biotic community of diverse organisms can become established, there must be soil. Depending mostly on the climate, it takes natural processes several hundred to several thousand years to produce fertile soil on bare rock.



Secondary succession begins in areas where natural biotic communities have been destroyed such as in abandoned farm lands, burned or cut forests, lands that have been flooded. Since some soil or sediment is present, succession is faster than primary succession.

Description of ecological succession usually focuses on changes in vegetation. However, these vegetational changes in turn affect food and shelter for various types of animals. Thus, as succession proceeds, the numbers and types of animals and decomposers also change.

At any time during primary or secondary succession, natural or human induced disturbances (fire, deforestation, etc.), can convert a particular seral stage of succession to an earlier stage. Also such disturbances create new conditions that encourage some species and discourage or eliminate other species.

14.6.1 Succession of Plants

Based on the nature of the habitat – whether it is water (or very wet areas) or it is on very dry areas – succession of plants is called hydrarch or xerarch, respectively. **Hydrarch succession** takes place in wet areas and the successional series progress from hydric to the mesic conditions. As against this, **xerarch succession** takes place in dry areas and the series progress from xeric to mesic conditions. Hence, both hydrarch and xerarch successions lead to medium water conditions (mesic) – neither too dry (xeric) nor too wet (hydric).

The species that invade a bare area are called **pioneer species**. In primary succession on rocks these are usually lichens which are able to secrete acids to dissolve rock, helping in weathering and soil formation. These later pave way to some very small plants like bryophytes, which are able to take hold in the small amount of soil. They are, with time, succeeded by higher plants, and after several more stages, ultimately a stable climax forest community is formed. The climax community remains stable as long as the environment remains unchanged. With time the xerophytic habitat gets converted into a mesophytic one.

In primary succession in water, the pioneers are the small phytoplanktons, which are replaced with time by rooted-submerged plants, rooted-floating angiosperms followed by free-floating plants, then reed-swamp, marsh-meadow, scrub and finally the trees. The climax again would be a forest. With time the water body is converted into land (Figure 14.5).

In secondary succession the species that invade depend on the condition of the soil, availability of water, the environment as also the seeds or other propagules present. Since soil is already there, the rate of succession is much faster and hence, climax is also reached more quickly.

What is important to understand is that succession, particularly primary succession, is a very slow process, taking maybe thousands of

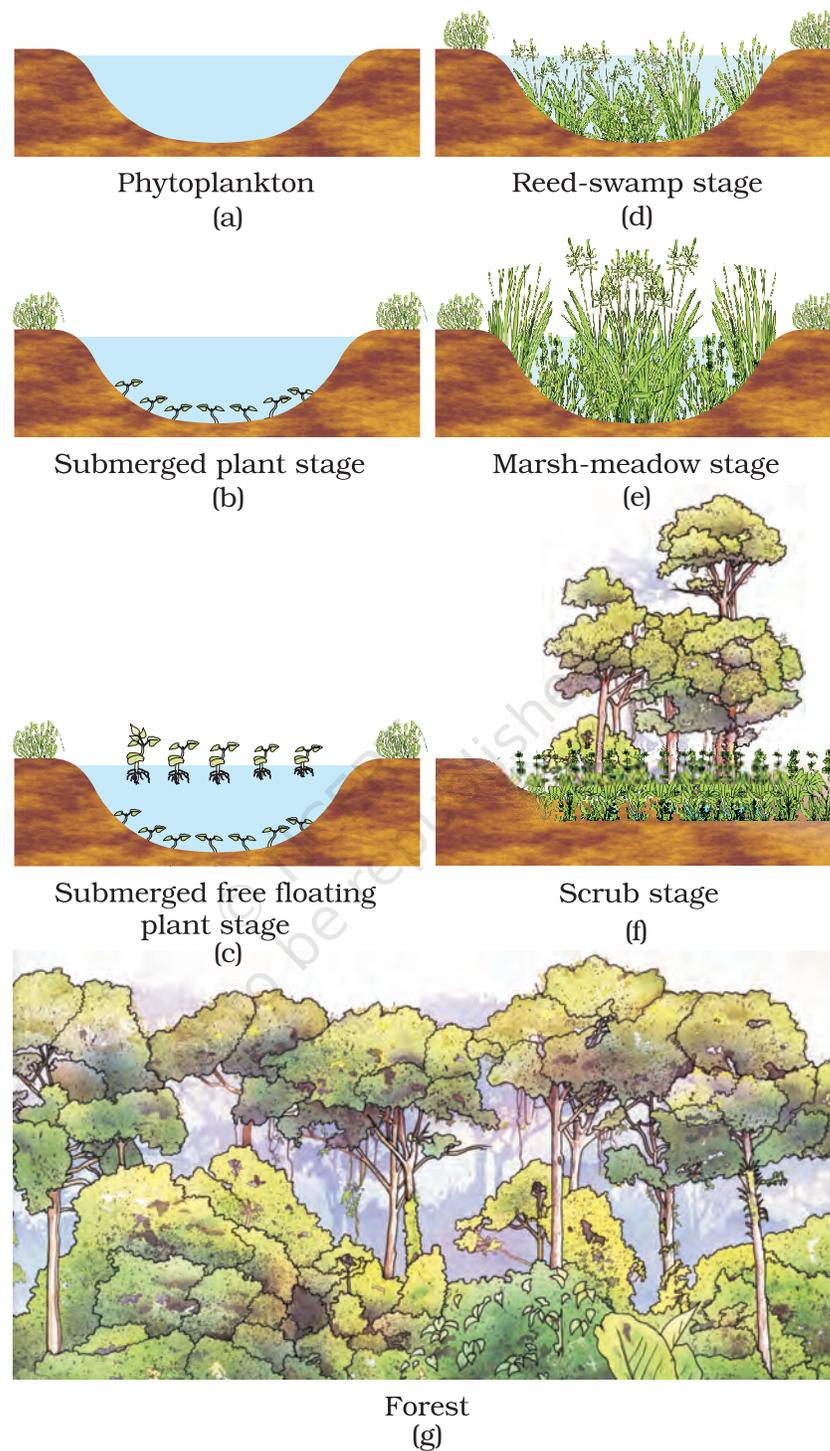


Figure 14.5 Diagrammatic representation of primary succession

years for the climax to be reached. Another important fact is to understand that all succession whether taking place in water or on land, proceeds to a similar climax community – the mesic.



14.7 NUTRIENT CYCLING

You have studied in Class XI that organisms need a constant supply of nutrients to grow, reproduce and regulate various body functions. The amount of nutrients, such as carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, calcium, etc., present in the soil at any given time, is referred to as the **standing state**. It varies in different kinds of ecosystems and also on a seasonal basis.

What is important is to appreciate that nutrients which are never lost from the ecosystems, rather they are recycled time and again indefinitely. The movement of nutrient elements through the various components of an ecosystem is called **nutrient cycling**. Another name of nutrient cycling is **biogeochemical** cycles (bio: living organism, geo: rocks, air, water). Nutrient cycles are of two types: (a) **gaseous** and (b) **sedimentary**. The

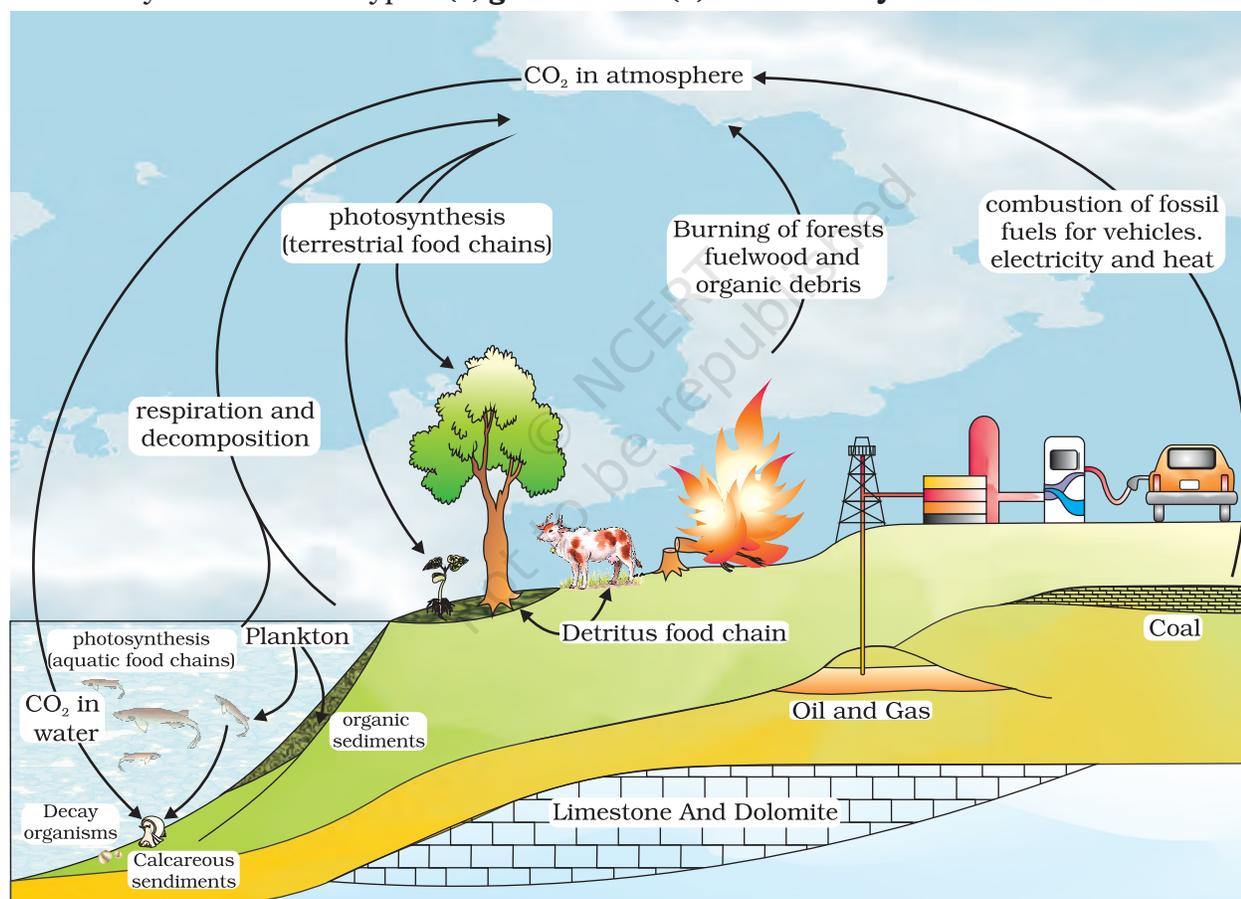


Figure 14.6 Simplified model of carbon cycle in the biosphere

reservoir for gaseous type of nutrient cycle (e.g., nitrogen, carbon cycle) exists in the atmosphere and for the sedimentary cycle (e.g., sulphur and phosphorus cycle), the reservoir is located in Earth's crust. Environmental factors, e.g., soil, moisture, pH, temperature, etc., regulate the rate of release of nutrients into the atmosphere. The function of the reservoir is

to meet with the deficit which occurs due to imbalance in the rate of influx and efflux.

You have made a detailed study of nitrogen cycle in class XI. Here we discuss carbon and phosphorus cycles.

14.7.1 Ecosystem – Carbon Cycle

When you study the composition of living organisms, carbon constitutes 49 per cent of dry weight of organisms and is next only to water. If we look at the total quantity of global carbon, we find that 71 per cent carbon is found dissolved in oceans. This oceanic reservoir regulates the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (Figure 14.6). *Do you know that the atmosphere only contains about 1 per cent of total global carbon?*

Fossil fuel also represent a reservoir of carbon. Carbon cycling occurs through atmosphere, ocean and through living and dead organisms. According to one estimate 4×10^{13} kg of carbon is fixed annually in the biosphere through photosynthesis. A considerable amount of carbon returns to the atmosphere as CO_2 through respiratory activities of the producers and consumers. Decomposers also contribute substantially to CO_2 pool by their processing of waste materials and dead organic matter of land or oceans. Some amount of the fixed carbon is lost to sediments and removed from circulation. Burning of wood, forest fire and combustion of organic matter, fossil fuel, volcanic activity are additional sources for releasing CO_2 in the atmosphere.

Human activities have significantly influenced the carbon cycle. Rapid deforestation and massive burning of fossil fuel for energy and transport have significantly increased the rate of release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (see greenhouse effect in Chapter 16).

14.7.2 Ecosystem – Phosphorus Cycle

Phosphorus is a major constituent of biological membranes, nucleic acids and cellular energy transfer systems. Many animals also need large quantities of this element to make shells, bones and teeth. The natural reservoir of phosphorus is rock, which contains phosphorus in the form of phosphates. When rocks are weathered, minute amounts of these phosphates dissolve in soil solution and are absorbed by the roots of the plants (Figure 14.7). Herbivores and other animals obtain this element from plants. The waste products and the dead organisms are decomposed by phosphate-solubilising bacteria releasing phosphorus. Unlike carbon cycle, there is no respiratory release of phosphorus into atmosphere. *Can you differentiate between the carbon and the phosphorus cycle?*

The other two major and important differences between carbon and phosphorus cycle are firstly, atmospheric inputs of phosphorus through rainfall are much smaller than carbon inputs, and, secondly, gaseous

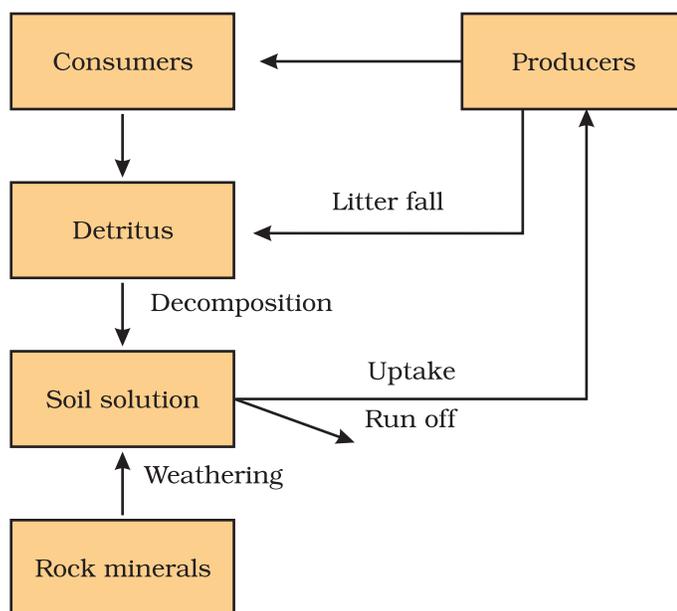


Figure 14.7 A simplified model of phosphorus cycling in a terrestrial ecosystem

exchanges of phosphorus between organism and environment are negligible.

14.8 ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Healthy ecosystems are the base for a wide range of economic, environmental and aesthetic goods and services. The products of ecosystem processes are named as **ecosystem services**, for example, healthy forest ecosystems purify air and water, mitigate droughts and floods, cycle nutrients, generate fertile soils, provide wildlife habitat, maintain biodiversity, pollinate crops, provide storage site for carbon and also provide aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values. Though value of such services of biodiversity is difficult to determine, it seems reasonable to think that biodiversity should carry a hefty price tag.

Robert Constanza and his colleagues have very recently tried to put price tags on nature's life-support services. Researchers have put an average price tag of US \$ 33 trillion a year on these fundamental ecosystems services, which are largely taken for granted because they are free. This is nearly twice the value of the global gross national product GNP which is (US \$ 18 trillion).

Out of the total cost of various ecosystem services, the soil formation accounts for about 50 per cent, and contributions of other services like recreation and nutrient cycling, are less than 10 per cent each. The cost of climate regulation and habitat for wildlife are about 6 per cent each.

SUMMARY

An ecosystem is a structural and functional unit of nature and it comprises abiotic and biotic components. Abiotic components are inorganic materials- air, water and soil, whereas biotic components are producers, consumers and decomposers. Each ecosystem has characteristic physical structure resulting from interaction amongst abiotic and biotic components. Species composition and stratification are the two main structural features of an ecosystem. Based on source of nutrition every organism occupies a place in an ecosystem.

Productivity, decomposition, energy flow, and nutrient cycling are the four important components of an ecosystem. Primary productivity is the rate of capture of solar energy or biomass production of the producers. It is divided into two types: gross primary productivity (GPP) and net primary productivity (NPP). Rate of capture of solar energy or total production of organic matter is called as GPP. NPP is the remaining biomass or the energy left after utilisation of producers. Secondary productivity is the rate of assimilation of food energy by the consumers. In decomposition, complex organic compounds of detritus are converted to carbon dioxide, water and inorganic nutrients by the decomposers. Decomposition involves three processes, namely fragmentation of detritus, leaching and catabolism.

Energy flow is unidirectional. First, plants capture solar energy and then, food is transferred from the producers to decomposers. Organisms of different trophic levels in nature are connected to each other for food or energy relationship forming a food chain. The storage and movement of nutrient elements through the various components of the ecosystem is called nutrient cycling; nutrients are repeatedly used through this process. Nutrient cycling is of two types—gaseous and sedimentary. Atmosphere or hydrosphere is the reservoir for the gaseous type of cycle (carbon), whereas Earth's crust is the reservoir for sedimentary type (phosphorus). Products of ecosystem processes are named as ecosystem services, e.g., purification of air and water by forests.

The biotic community is dynamic and undergoes changes with the passage of time. These changes are sequentially ordered and constitute ecological succession. Succession begins with invasion of a bare lifeless area by pioneers which later pave way for successors and ultimately a stable climax community is formed. The climax community remains stable as long as the environment remains unchanged.

EXERCISES

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1. Fill in the blanks.
 - (a) Plants are called as _____ because they fix carbon dioxide.
 - (b) In an ecosystem dominated by trees, the pyramid (of numbers) is _____ type.
 - (c) In aquatic ecosystems, the limiting factor for the productivity is _____.



- (d) Common detritivores in our ecosystem are_____.
- (e) The major reservoir of carbon on earth is_____.
2. Which one of the following has the largest population in a food chain?
 - (a) Producers
 - (b) Primary consumers
 - (c) Secondary consumers
 - (d) Decomposers
 3. The second trophic level in a lake is
 - (a) Phytoplankton
 - (b) Zooplankton
 - (c) Benthos
 - (d) Fishes
 4. Secondary producers are
 - (a) Herbivores
 - (b) Producers
 - (c) Carnivores
 - (d) None of the above
 5. What is the percentage of photosynthetically active radiation (PAR) in the incident solar radiation?
 - (a) 100%
 - (b) 50 %
 - (c) 1-5%
 - (d) 2-10%
 6. Distinguish between
 - (a) Grazing food chain and detritus food chain
 - (b) Production and decomposition
 - (c) Upright and inverted pyramid
 - (d) Food chain and Food web
 - (e) Litter and detritus
 - (f) Primary and secondary productivity
 7. Describe the components of an ecosystem.
 8. Define ecological pyramids and describe with examples, pyramids of number and biomass.
 9. What is primary productivity? Give brief description of factors that affect primary productivity.
 10. Define decomposition and describe the processes and products of decomposition.
 11. Give an account of energy flow in an ecosystem.
 12. Write important features of a sedimentary cycle in an ecosystem.
 13. Outline salient features of carbon cycling in an ecosystem.

CHAPTER 15



BIODIVERSITY AND CONSERVATION

15.1 Biodiversity

15.2 Biodiversity Conservation

If an alien from a distant galaxy were to visit our planet Earth, the first thing that would amaze and baffle him would most probably be the enormous diversity of life that he would encounter. Even for humans, the rich variety of living organisms with which they share this planet never ceases to astonish and fascinate us. The common man would find it hard to believe that there are more than 20,000 species of ants, 3,00,000 species of beetles, 28,000 species of fishes and nearly 20,000 species of orchids. Ecologists and evolutionary biologists have been trying to understand the significance of such diversity by asking important questions– *Why are there so many species? Did such great diversity exist throughout earth's history? How did this diversification come about? How and why is this diversity important to the biosphere? Would it function any differently if the diversity was much less? How do humans benefit from the diversity of life?*

15.1 BIODIVERSITY

In our biosphere immense diversity (or heterogeneity) exists not only at the species level but at all levels of biological organisation ranging from macromolecules within cells to biomes. Biodiversity is the term popularised by the sociobiologist Edward Wilson to describe the



combined diversity at all the levels of biological organisation.

The most important of them are–

- (i) **Genetic diversity:** A single species might show high diversity at the genetic level over its distributional range. The genetic variation shown by the medicinal plant *Rauwolfia vomitoria* growing in different Himalayan ranges might be in terms of the potency and concentration of the active chemical (reserpine) that the plant produces. India has more than 50,000 genetically different strains of rice, and 1,000 varieties of mango.
- (ii) **Species diversity:** The diversity at the species level, for example, the Western Ghats have a greater amphibian species diversity than the Eastern Ghats.
- (iii) **Ecological diversity:** At the ecosystem level, India, for instance, with its deserts, rain forests, mangroves, coral reefs, wetlands, estuaries, and alpine meadows has a greater ecosystem diversity than a Scandinavian country like Norway.

It has taken millions of years of evolution, to accumulate this rich diversity in nature, but we could lose all that wealth in less than two centuries if the present rates of species losses continue. Biodiversity and its conservation are now vital environmental issues of international concern as more and more people around the world begin to realise the critical importance of biodiversity for our survival and well-being on this planet.

15.1.1 How Many Species are there on Earth and How Many in India?

Since there are published records of all the species discovered and named, we know how many species in all have been recorded so far, but it is not easy to answer the question of how many species there are on earth. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) (2004), the total number of plant and animal species described so far is slightly more than 1.5 million, but we have no clear idea of how many species are yet to be discovered and described. Estimates vary widely and many of them are only educated guesses. For many taxonomic groups, species inventories are more complete in temperate than in tropical countries. Considering that an overwhelmingly large proportion of the species waiting to be discovered are in the tropics, biologists make a statistical comparison of the temperate-tropical species richness of an exhaustively studied group of insects and extrapolate this ratio to other groups of animals and plants to come up with a gross estimate of the total number of species on earth. Some extreme estimates range from 20 to 50 million, but a more conservative and scientifically sound estimate made by Robert May places the global species diversity at about 7 million.

Let us look at some interesting aspects about earth's biodiversity based on the currently available species inventories. More than 70 per cent of all the species recorded are animals, while plants (including algae, fungi, bryophytes, gymnosperms and angiosperms) comprise no more than 22 per cent of the total. Among animals, insects are the most species-rich taxonomic group, making up more than 70 per cent of the total. That means, out of every 10 animals on this planet, 7 are insects. Again, how do we explain this enormous diversification of insects? The number of fungi species in the world is more than the combined total of the species of fishes, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. In Figure 15.1, biodiversity is depicted showing species number of major taxa.

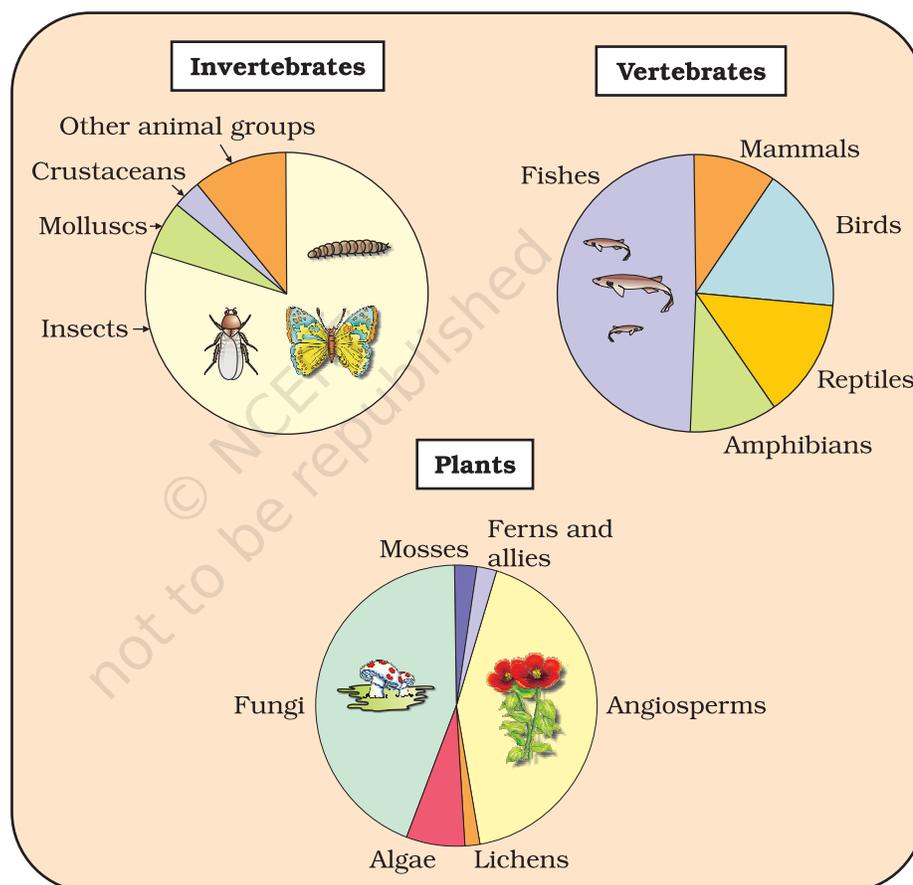


Figure 15.1 Representing global biodiversity: proportionate number of species of major taxa of plants, invertebrates and vertebrates

It should be noted that these estimates do not give any figures for prokaryotes. Biologists are not sure about how many prokaryotic species there might be. The problem is that conventional taxonomic methods are not suitable for identifying microbial species and many species are simply not culturable under laboratory conditions. If we accept biochemical or molecular criteria for delineating species for this group, then their diversity alone might run into millions.



Although India has only 2.4 per cent of the world's land area, its share of the global species diversity is an impressive 8.1 per cent. That is what makes our country one of the 12 mega diversity countries of the world. Nearly 45,000 species of plants and twice as many of animals have been recorded from India. How many living species are actually there waiting to be discovered and named? If we accept May's global estimates, only 22 per cent of the total species have been recorded so far. Applying this proportion to India's diversity figures, we estimate that there are probably more than 1,00,000 plant species and more than 3,00,000 animal species yet to be discovered and described. Would we ever be able to complete the inventory of the biological wealth of our country? Consider the immense trained manpower (taxonomists) and the time required to complete the job. The situation appears more hopeless when we realise that a large fraction of these species faces the threat of becoming extinct even before we discover them. Nature's biological library is burning even before we catalogued the titles of all the books stocked there.

15.1.2 Patterns of Biodiversity

- (i) **Latitudinal gradients:** The diversity of plants and animals is not uniform throughout the world but shows a rather uneven distribution. For many group of animals or plants, there are interesting patterns in diversity, the most well-known being the latitudinal gradient in diversity. In general, species diversity decreases as we move away from the equator towards the poles. With very few exceptions, tropics (latitudinal range of 23.5° N to 23.5° S) harbour more species than temperate or polar areas. Colombia located near the equator has nearly 1,400 species of birds while New York at 41° N has 105 species and Greenland at 71° N only 56 species. India, with much of its land area in the tropical latitudes, has more than 1,200 species of birds. A forest in a tropical region like Equador has up to 10 times as many species of vascular plants as a forest of equal area in a temperate region like the Midwest of the USA. The largely tropical Amazonian rain forest in South America has the greatest biodiversity on earth- it is home to more than 40,000 species of plants, 3,000 of fishes, 1,300 of birds, 427 of mammals, 427 of amphibians, 378 of reptiles and of more than 1,25,000 invertebrates. Scientists estimate that in these rain forests there might be at least two million insect species waiting to be discovered and named.

What is so special about tropics that might account for their greater biological diversity? Ecologists and evolutionary biologists have proposed various hypotheses; some important ones are (a) Speciation is generally a function of time, unlike temperate regions subjected to frequent glaciations in the past, tropical latitudes have remained relatively undisturbed for millions of years and thus, had a long

evolutionary time for species diversification, (b) Tropical environments, unlike temperate ones, are less seasonal, relatively more constant and predictable. Such constant environments promote niche specialisation and lead to a greater species diversity and (c) There is more solar energy available in the tropics, which contributes to higher productivity; this in turn might contribute indirectly to greater diversity.

- (ii) **Species-Area relationships**: During his pioneering and extensive explorations in the wilderness of South American jungles, the great German naturalist and geographer Alexander von Humboldt

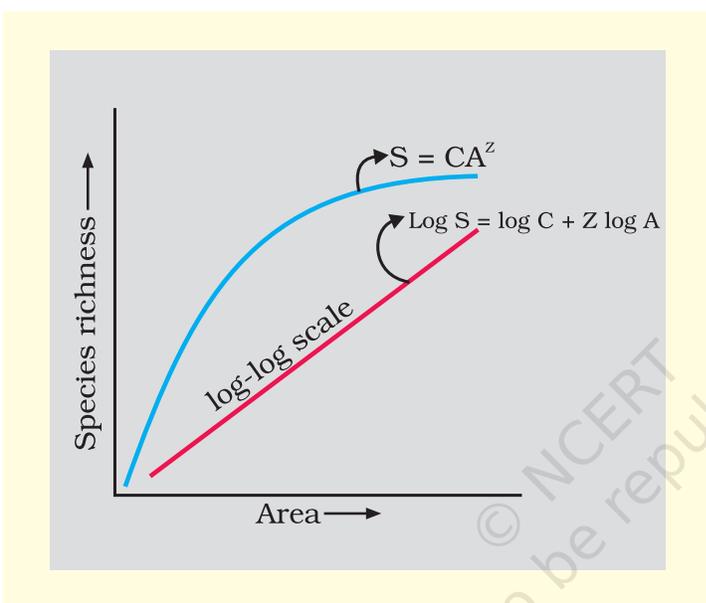


Figure 15.2 Showing species area relationship. Note that on log scale the relationship becomes linear

observed that within a region species richness increased with increasing explored area, but only up to a limit. In fact, the relation between species richness and area for a wide variety of taxa (angiosperm plants, birds, bats, freshwater fishes) turns out to be a rectangular hyperbola (Figure 15.2). On a logarithmic scale, the relationship is a straight line described by the equation

$$\log S = \log C + Z \log A$$

where

S = Species richness A = Area

Z = slope of the line (regression coefficient)

C = Y-intercept

Ecologists have discovered that the value of Z lies in the range of 0.1 to 0.2, regardless of the taxonomic group or the region (whether it is the plants in Britain,

birds in California or molluscs in New York state, the slopes of the regression line are amazingly similar). But, if you analyse the species-area relationships among very large areas like the entire continents, you will find that the slope of the line to be much steeper (Z values in the range of 0.6 to 1.2). For example, for frugivorous (fruit-eating) birds and mammals in the tropical forests of different continents, the slope is found to be 1.15. *What do steeper slopes mean in this context?*

15.1.3 The importance of Species Diversity to the Ecosystem

Does the number of species in a community really matter to the functioning of the ecosystem? This is a question for which ecologists have not been able to give a definitive answer. For many decades, ecologists believed that communities with more species, generally, tend to be more stable than those with less species. What exactly is stability for a biological



community? A stable community should not show too much variation in productivity from year to year; it must be either resistant or resilient to occasional disturbances (natural or man-made), and it must also be resistant to invasions by alien species. We don't know how these attributes are linked to species richness in a community, but David Tilman's long-term ecosystem experiments using outdoor plots provide some tentative answers. Tilman found that plots with more species showed less year-to-year variation in total biomass. He also showed that in his experiments, increased diversity contributed to higher productivity.

Although, we may not understand completely how species richness contributes to the well-being of an ecosystem, we know enough to realise that rich biodiversity is not only essential for ecosystem health but imperative for the very survival of the human race on this planet. At a time when we are losing species at an alarming pace, one might ask—Does it really matter to us if a few species become extinct? Would Western Ghats ecosystems be less functional if one of its tree frog species is lost forever? How is our quality of life affected if, say, instead of 20,000 we have only 15,000 species of ants on earth?

There are no direct answers to such naïve questions but we can develop a proper perspective through an analogy (the 'rivet popper hypothesis') used by Stanford ecologist Paul Ehrlich. In an airplane (ecosystem) all parts are joined together using thousands of rivets (species). If every passenger travelling in it starts popping a rivet to take home (causing a species to become extinct), it may not affect flight safety (proper functioning of the ecosystem) initially, but as more and more rivets are removed, the plane becomes dangerously weak over a period of time. Furthermore, which rivet is removed may also be critical. Loss of rivets on the wings (key species that drive major ecosystem functions) is obviously a more serious threat to flight safety than loss of a few rivets on the seats or windows inside the plane.

15.1.4 Loss of Biodiversity

While it is doubtful if any new species are being added (through speciation) into the earth's treasury of species, there is no doubt about their continuing losses. The biological wealth of our planet has been declining rapidly and the accusing finger is clearly pointing to human activities. The colonisation of tropical Pacific Islands by humans is said to have led to the extinction of more than 2,000 species of native birds. The IUCN Red List (2004) documents the extinction of 784 species (including 338 vertebrates, 359 invertebrates and 87 plants) in the last 500 years. Some examples of recent extinctions include the dodo (Mauritius), quagga (Africa), thylacine (Australia), Steller's Sea Cow (Russia) and three subspecies (Bali, Javan, Caspian) of tiger. The last twenty years alone have witnessed the disappearance of 27 species. Careful analysis of records

shows that extinctions across taxa are not random; some groups like amphibians appear to be more vulnerable to extinction. Adding to the grim scenario of extinctions is the fact that more than 15,500 species world-wide are facing the threat of extinction. Presently, 12 per cent of all bird species, 23 per cent of all mammal species, 32 per cent of all amphibian species and 31 per cent of all gymnosperm species in the world face the threat of extinction.

From a study of the history of life on earth through fossil records, we learn that large-scale loss of species like the one we are currently witnessing have also happened earlier, even before humans appeared on the scene. During the long period (> 3 billion years) since the origin and diversification of life on earth there were five episodes of mass extinction of species. How is the 'Sixth Extinction' presently in progress different from the previous episodes? The difference is in the rates; the current species extinction rates are estimated to be 100 to 1,000 times faster than in the pre-human times and our activities are responsible for the faster rates. Ecologists warn that if the present trends continue, nearly half of all the species on earth might be wiped out within the next 100 years.

In general, loss of biodiversity in a region may lead to (a) decline in plant production, (b) lowered resistance to environmental perturbations such as drought and (c) increased variability in certain ecosystem processes such as plant productivity, water use, and pest and disease cycles.

Causes of biodiversity losses: The accelerated rates of species extinctions that the world is facing now are largely due to human activities. There are four major causes ('The Evil Quartet' is the sobriquet used to describe them).

- (i) **Habitat loss and fragmentation:** This is the most important cause driving animals and plants to extinction. The most dramatic examples of habitat loss come from tropical rain forests. Once covering more than 14 per cent of the earth's land surface, these rain forests now cover no more than 6 per cent. They are being destroyed fast. By the time you finish reading this chapter, 1000 more hectares of rain forest would have been lost. The Amazon rain forest (it is so huge that it is called the 'lungs of the planet') harbouring probably millions of species is being cut and cleared for cultivating *soya beans* or for conversion to grasslands for raising beef cattle. Besides total loss, the degradation of many habitats by pollution also threatens the survival of many species. When large habitats are broken up into small fragments due to various human activities, mammals and birds requiring large territories and certain animals with migratory habits are badly affected, leading to population declines.
- (ii) **Over-exploitation:** Humans have always depended on nature for food and shelter, but when 'need' turns to 'greed', it leads to



over-exploitation of natural resources. Many species extinctions in the last 500 years (Steller's sea cow, passenger pigeon) were due to overexploitation by humans. Presently many marine fish populations around the world are over harvested, endangering the continued existence of some commercially important species.

- (iii) **Alien species invasions:** When alien species are introduced unintentionally or deliberately for whatever purpose, some of them turn invasive, and cause decline or extinction of indigenous species. The Nile perch introduced into Lake Victoria in east Africa led eventually to the extinction of an ecologically unique assemblage of more than 200 species of cichlid fish in the lake. You must be familiar with the environmental damage caused and threat posed to our native species by invasive weed species like carrot grass (*Parthenium*), *Lantana* and water hyacinth (*Eicchornia*). The recent illegal introduction of the African catfish *Clarias gariepinus* for aquaculture purposes is posing a threat to the indigenous catfishes in our rivers.
- (iv) **Co-extinctions:** When a species becomes extinct, the plant and animal species associated with it in an obligatory way also become extinct. When a host fish species becomes extinct, its unique assemblage of parasites also meets the same fate. Another example is the case of a coevolved plant-pollinator mutualism where extinction of one invariably leads to the extinction of the other.

15.2 BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

15.2.1 Why Should We Conserve Biodiversity?

There are many reasons, some obvious and others not so obvious, but all equally important. They can be grouped into three categories: narrowly utilitarian, broadly utilitarian, and ethical.

The **narrowly utilitarian** arguments for conserving biodiversity are obvious; humans derive countless direct economic benefits from nature-food (cereals, pulses, fruits), firewood, fibre, construction material, industrial products (tannins, lubricants, dyes, resins, perfumes) and products of medicinal importance. More than 25 per cent of the drugs currently sold in the market worldwide are derived from plants and 25,000 species of plants contribute to the traditional medicines used by native peoples around the world. Nobody knows how many more medicinally useful plants there are in tropical rain forests waiting to be explored. With increasing resources put into 'bioprospecting' (exploring molecular, genetic and species-level diversity for products of economic importance), nations endowed with rich biodiversity can expect to reap enormous benefits.

The **broadly utilitarian** argument says that biodiversity plays a major role in many ecosystem services that nature provides. The fast-

dwindling Amazon forest is estimated to produce, through photosynthesis, 20 per cent of the total oxygen in the earth's atmosphere. Can we put an economic value on this service by nature? You can get some idea by finding out how much your neighborhood hospital spends on a cylinder of oxygen. Pollination (without which plants cannot give us fruits or seeds) is another service, ecosystems provide through pollinators layer – bees, bumblebees, birds and bats. *What will be the costs of accomplishing pollination without help from natural pollinators?* There are other intangible benefits – that we derive from nature—the aesthetic pleasures of walking through thick woods, watching spring flowers in full bloom or waking up to a bulbul's song in the morning. Can we put a price tag on such things?

The **ethical** argument for conserving biodiversity relates to what we owe to millions of plant, animal and microbe species with whom we share this planet. Philosophically or spiritually, we need to realise that every species has an intrinsic value, even if it may not be of current or any economic value to us. We have a moral duty to care for their well-being and pass on our biological legacy in good order to future generations.

15.2.2 How do we conserve Biodiversity?

When we conserve and protect the whole ecosystem, its biodiversity at all levels is protected - we save the entire forest to save the tiger. This approach is called *in situ* (on site) conservation. However, when there are situations where an animal or plant is endangered or threatened (organisms facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future) and needs urgent measures to save it from extinction, *ex situ* (off site) conservation is the desirable approach.

In situ conservation– Faced with the conflict between development and conservation, many nations find it unrealistic and economically not feasible to conserve all their biological wealth. Invariably, the number of species waiting to be saved from extinction far exceeds the conservation resources available. On a global basis, this problem has been addressed by eminent conservationists. They identified for maximum protection certain 'biodiversity hotspots' regions with very high levels of species richness and high degree of **endemism** (that is, species confined to that region and not found anywhere else). Initially 25 biodiversity hotspots were identified but subsequently nine more have been added to the list, bringing the total number of biodiversity hotspots in the world to 34. These hotspots are also regions of accelerated habitat loss. Three of these hotspots – Western Ghats and Sri Lanka, Indo-Burma and Himalaya – cover our country's exceptionally high biodiversity regions. Although all the biodiversity hotspots put together cover less than 2 per cent of the earth's land area, the number of species they collectively



harbour is extremely high and strict protection of these hotspots could reduce the ongoing mass extinctions by almost 30 per cent.

In India, ecologically unique and biodiversity-rich regions are legally protected as biosphere reserves, national parks and sanctuaries. India now has 14 biosphere reserves, 90 national parks and 448 wildlife sanctuaries. India has also a history of religious and cultural traditions that emphasised protection of nature. In many cultures, tracts of forest were set aside, and all the trees and wildlife within were venerated and given total protection. Such **sacred groves** are found in Khasi and Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya, Aravalli Hills of Rajasthan, Western Ghat regions of Karnataka and Maharashtra and the Sarguja, Chanda and Bastar areas of Madhya Pradesh. In Meghalaya, the sacred groves are the last refuges for a large number of rare and threatened plants.

Ex situ Conservation– In this approach, threatened animals and plants are taken out from their natural habitat and placed in special setting where they can be protected and given special care. Zoological parks, botanical gardens and wildlife safari parks serve this purpose. There are many animals that have become extinct in the wild but continue to be maintained in zoological parks. In recent years *ex situ* conservation has advanced beyond keeping threatened species in enclosures. Now gametes of threatened species can be preserved in viable and fertile condition for long periods using cryopreservation techniques, eggs can be fertilised *in vitro*, and plants can be propagated using tissue culture methods. Seeds of different genetic strains of commercially important plants can be kept for long periods in seed banks.

Biodiversity knows no political boundaries and its conservation is therefore a collective responsibility of all nations. The historic Convention on Biological Diversity (‘The Earth Summit’) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, called upon all nations to take appropriate measures for conservation of biodiversity and sustainable utilisation of its benefits. In a follow-up, the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, 190 countries pledged their commitment to achieve by 2010, a significant reduction in the current rate of biodiversity loss at global, regional and local levels.

SUMMARY

Since life originated on earth nearly 3.8 billion years ago, there had been enormous diversification of life forms on earth. Biodiversity refers to the sum total of diversity that exists at all levels of biological organisation. Of particular importance is the diversity at genetic, species and ecosystem levels and conservation efforts are aimed at protecting diversity at all these levels.

More than 1.5 million species have been recorded in the world, but there might still be nearly 6 million species on earth waiting to be



discovered and named. Of the named species, > 70 per cent are animals, of which 70 per cent are insects. The group Fungi has more species than all the vertebrate species combined. India, with about 45,000 species of plants and twice as many species of animals, is one of the 12 mega diversity countries of the world.

Species diversity on earth is not uniformly distributed but shows interesting patterns. It is generally highest in the tropics and decreases towards the poles. Important explanations for the species richness of the tropics are: Tropics had more evolutionary time; they provide a relatively constant environment and, they receive more solar energy which contributes to greater productivity. Species richness is also function of the area of a region; the species-area relationship is generally a rectangular hyperbolic function.

It is believed that communities with high diversity tend to be less variable, more productive and more resistant to biological invasions. Earth's fossil history reveals incidence of mass extinctions in the past, but the present rates of extinction, largely attributed to human activities, are 100 to 1000 times higher. Nearly 700 species have become extinct in recent times and more than 15,500 species (of which > 650 are from India) currently face the threat of extinction. The causes of high extinction rates at present include habitat (particularly forests) loss and fragmentation, over-exploitation, biological invasions and co-extinctions.

Earth's rich biodiversity is vital for the very survival of mankind. The reasons for conserving biodiversity are narrowly utilitarian, broadly utilitarian and ethical. Besides the direct benefits (food, fibre, firewood, pharmaceuticals, etc.), there are many indirect benefits we receive through ecosystem services such as pollination, pest control, climate moderation and flood control. We also have a moral responsibility to take good care of earth's biodiversity and pass it on in good order to our next generation.

Biodiversity conservation may be *in situ* as well as *ex situ*. In *in situ* conservation, the endangered species are protected in their natural habitat so that the entire ecosystem is protected. Recently, 34 'biodiversity hotspots' in the world have been proposed for intensive conservation efforts. Of these, three (Western Ghats-Sri Lanka, Himalaya and Indo-Burma) cover India's rich biodiversity regions. Our country's *in situ* conservation efforts are reflected in its 14 biosphere reserves, 90 national parks, > 450 wildlife sanctuaries and many sacred groves. *Ex situ* conservation methods include protective maintenance of threatened species in zoological parks and botanical gardens, *in vitro* fertilisation, tissue culture propagation and cryopreservation of gametes.

EXERCISES

1. Name the three important components of biodiversity.
2. How do ecologists estimate the total number of species present in the world?

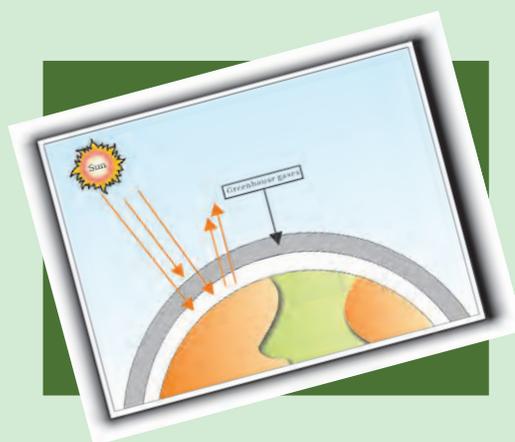


3. Give three hypotheses for explaining why tropics show greatest levels of species richness.
4. What is the significance of the slope of regression in a species – area relationship?
5. What are the major causes of species losses in a geographical region?
6. How is biodiversity important for ecosystem functioning?
7. What are sacred groves? What is their role in conservation?
8. Among the ecosystem services are control of floods and soil erosion. How is this achieved by the biotic components of the ecosystem?
9. The species diversity of plants (22 per cent) is much less than that of animals (72 per cent). What could be the explanations to how animals achieved greater diversification?
10. Can you think of a situation where we deliberately want to make a species extinct? How would you justify it?



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CHAPTER 16



ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

- 16.1 *Air Pollution and Its Control*
- 16.2 *Water Pollution and Its Control*
- 16.3 *Solid Wastes*
- 16.4 *Agro-chemicals and their Effects*
- 16.5 *Radioactive Wastes*
- 16.6 *Greenhouse Effect and Global Warming*
- 16.7 *Ozone Depletion in the Stratosphere*
- 16.8 *Degradation by Improper Resource Utilisation and Maintenance*
- 16.9 *Deforestation*

Human population size has grown enormously over the last hundred years. This means increase in demand for food, water, home, electricity, roads, automobiles and numerous other commodities. These demands are exerting tremendous pressure on our natural resources, and are also contributing to pollution of air, water and soil. The need of the hour is to check the degradation and depletion of our precious natural resources and pollution without halting the process of development.

Pollution is any undesirable change in physical, chemical or biological characteristics of air, land, water or soil. Agents that bring about such an undesirable change are called as **pollutants**. In order to control environmental pollution, the Government of India has passed the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986** to protect and improve the quality of our environment (air, water and soil).

16.1 AIR POLLUTION AND ITS CONTROL

We are dependent on air for our respiratory needs. Air pollutants cause injury to all living organisms. They reduce growth and yield of crops and cause premature death of plants. Air pollutants also deleteriously affect the respiratory system of humans and of animals. Harmful



effects depend on the concentration of pollutants, duration of exposure and the organism.

Smokestacks of thermal power plants, smelters and other industries release particulate and gaseous air pollutants together with harmless gases, such as nitrogen, oxygen, etc. These pollutants must be separated/filtered out before releasing the harmless gases into the atmosphere.

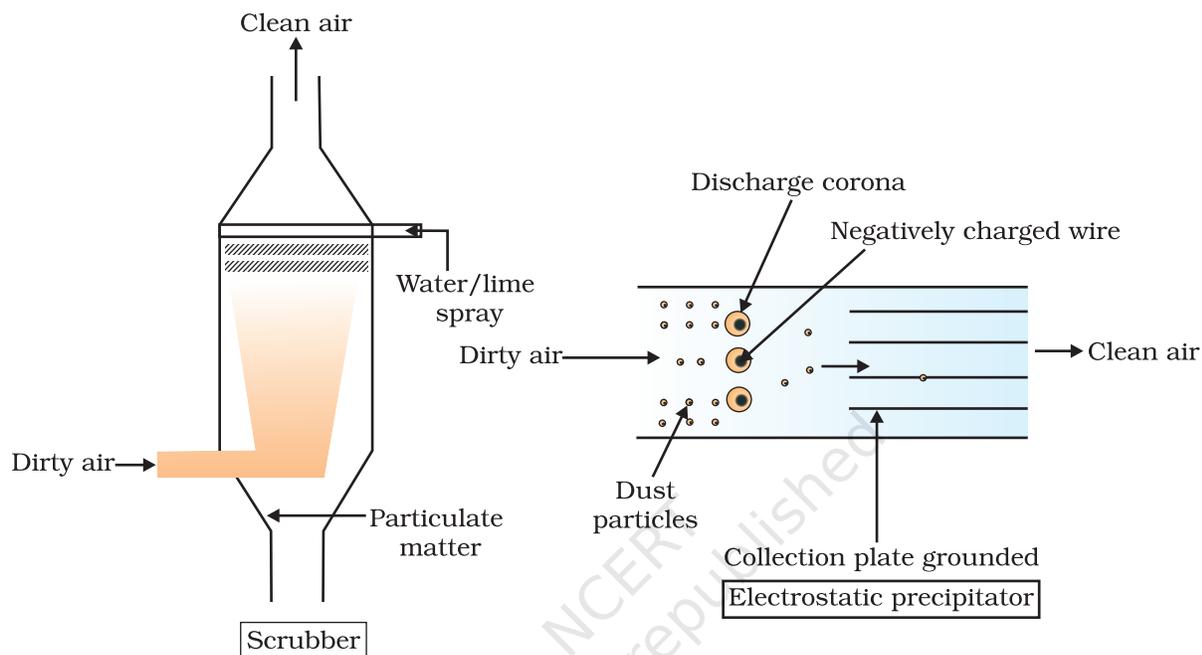


Figure 16.1 Electrostatic precipitator

There are several ways of removing particulate matter; the most widely used of which is the **electrostatic precipitator** (Figure 16.1), which can remove over 99 per cent particulate matter present in the exhaust from a thermal power plant. It has electrode wires that are maintained at several thousand volts, which produce a corona that releases electrons. These electrons attach to dust particles giving them a net negative charge. The collecting plates are grounded and attract the charged dust particles. The velocity of air between the plates must be low enough to allow the dust to fall. A scrubber (Figure 16.1) can remove gases like sulphur dioxide. In a scrubber, the exhaust is passed through a spray of water or lime. Recently we have realised the dangers of particulate matter that are very very small and are not removed by these precipitators. According to Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), particulate size 2.5 micrometers or less in diameter (PM 2.5) are responsible for causing the greatest harm to human health. These fine particulates can be inhaled deep into the lungs and can cause breathing and respiratory symptoms, irritation, inflammations and damage to the lungs and premature deaths.

Automobiles are a major cause for atmospheric pollution atleast in the metro cities. As the number of vehicles increase on the streets, this problem is now shifting to the other cities too. Proper maintenance of automobiles along with use of lead-free petrol or diesel can reduce the pollutants they emit. Catalytic converters, having expensive metals namely platinum-palladium and rhodium as the catalysts, are fitted into automobiles for reducing emission of poisonous gases. As the exhaust passes through the catalytic converter, unburnt hydrocarbons are converted into carbon dioxide and water, and carbon monoxide and nitric oxide are changed to carbon dioxide and nitrogen gas, respectively. Motor vehicles equipped with catalytic converter should use unleaded petrol because lead in the petrol inactivates the catalyst.

In India, the **Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act** came into force in 1981, but was amended in 1987 to include noise as an air pollutant. **Noise** is undesired high level of sound. We have got used to associating loud sounds with pleasure and entertainment not realising that noise causes psychological and physiological disorders in humans. The bigger the city, the bigger the function, the greater the noise!! A brief exposure to extremely high sound level, 150 dB or more generated by take off of a jet plane or rocket, may damage ear drums thus permanently impairing hearing ability. Even chronic exposure to a relatively lower noise level of cities may permanently damage hearing abilities of humans. Noise also causes sleeplessness, increased heart beat, altered breathing pattern, thus considerably stressing humans.

Considering the many dangerous effects of noise pollution can you identify the unnecessary sources of noise pollution around you which can be reduced immediately without any financial loss to anybody? Reduction of noise in our industries can be affected by use of sound-absorbent materials or by muffling noise. Stringent following of laws laid down in relation to noise like delimitation of horn-free zones around hospitals and schools, permissible sound-levels of crackers and of loudspeakers, timings after which loudspeakers cannot be played, etc., need to be enforced to protect ourselves from noise pollution.

16.1.1 Controlling Vehicular Air Pollution: A Case Study of Delhi

With its very large population of vehicular traffic, Delhi leads the country in its levels of air-pollution – it has more cars than the states of Gujarat and West Bengal put together. In the 1990s, Delhi ranked fourth among the 41 most polluted cities of the world. Air pollution problems in Delhi became so serious that a public interest litigation (PIL) was filed in the Supreme Court of India. After being censured very strongly by the Supreme Court, under its directives, the government was asked to take, within a specified time period, appropriate measures, including switching over the entire fleet of public transport, i.e., buses, from diesel to **compressed natural gas (CNG)**. All the buses of Delhi were converted to run on CNG by the end of 2002. You may ask the question as to why CNG is better than diesel. The answer is that



CNG burns most efficiently, unlike petrol or diesel, in the automobiles and very little of it is left unburnt. Moreover, CNG is cheaper than petrol or diesel, cannot be siphoned off by thieves and adulterated like petrol or diesel. The main problem with switching over to CNG is the difficulty of laying down pipelines to deliver CNG through distribution points/pumps and ensuring uninterrupted supply. Simultaneously parallel steps taken in Delhi for reducing vehicular pollution include phasing out of old vehicles, use of unleaded petrol, use of low-sulphur petrol and diesel, use of catalytic converters in vehicles, application of stringent pollution-level norms for vehicles, etc.

The Government of India through a new auto fuel policy has laid out a roadmap to cut down vehicular pollution in Indian cities. More stringent norms for fuels means steadily reducing the sulphur and aromatic content in petrol and diesel fuels. Euro III norms, for example, stipulate that sulphur be controlled at 350 parts-per-million (ppm) in diesel and 150 ppm in petrol. Aromatic hydrocarbons are to be contained at 42 per cent of the concerned fuel. The goal, according to the roadmap, is to reduce sulphur to 50 ppm in petrol and diesel and bring down the level to 35 per cent. Corresponding to the fuel, vehicle engines will also need to be upgraded.

Mass Emission Standards (Bharat Stage II which is equivalent to Euro-II norms) are no more applicable in any of the cities of India. Details of the latest Mass Emission Standards in India are provided below (Table 16.1)

Table 16.1: Table Showing the Mass Emission Standards in India

Type of Vehicles	Norms	Cities of Implementation
4 Wheelers	Bharat Stage IV	Throughout the country since April 2017
3 Wheelers	Bharat Stage IV	Throughout the country since 1st April 2017
2 Wheelers	Bharat Stage IV	Throughout the country since April 2017

Thanks to the efforts made, the air quality of Delhi has significantly improved. According to an estimate, a substantial fall in CO₂ and SO₂ level has been found in Delhi between 1997 and 2005.

16.2 WATER POLLUTION AND ITS CONTROL

Human beings have been abusing the water-bodies around the world by disposing into them all kinds of waste. We tend to believe that water can wash away everything not taking cognizance of the fact that the water bodies are our lifeline as well as that of all other living organisms. *Can you list what all we tend to try and wash away through our rivers and drains?* Due to such activities of human kind, the ponds, lakes, stream,

ivers, estuaries and oceans are becoming polluted in several parts of the world. Realising the importance of maintaining the cleanliness of the water bodies, the Government of India has passed the **Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974** to safeguard our water resources.

16.2.1 Domestic Sewage and Industrial Effluents

As we work with water in our homes in the cities and towns, we wash

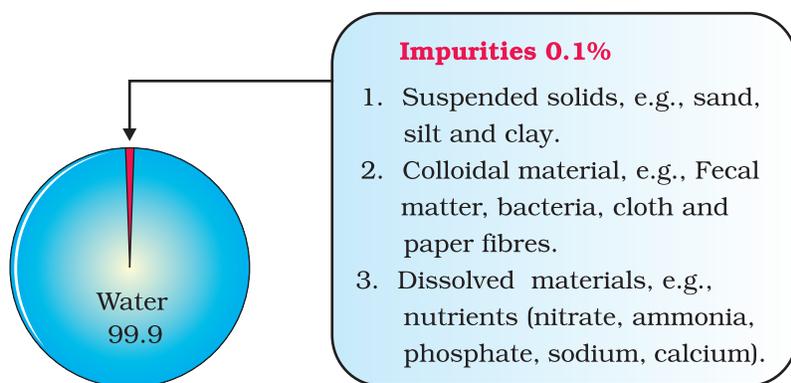


Figure 16.2 Composition of waste water

everything into drains. Have you ever wondered where the sewage that comes out of our houses go? What happens in villages? Is the sewage treated before being transported to the nearest river and mixed with it? A mere 0.1 per cent impurities make domestic sewage unfit for human use (Figure 16.2). You have read about sewage treatment plants in Chapter 10. Solids are relatively easy to remove, what is most difficult to remove are

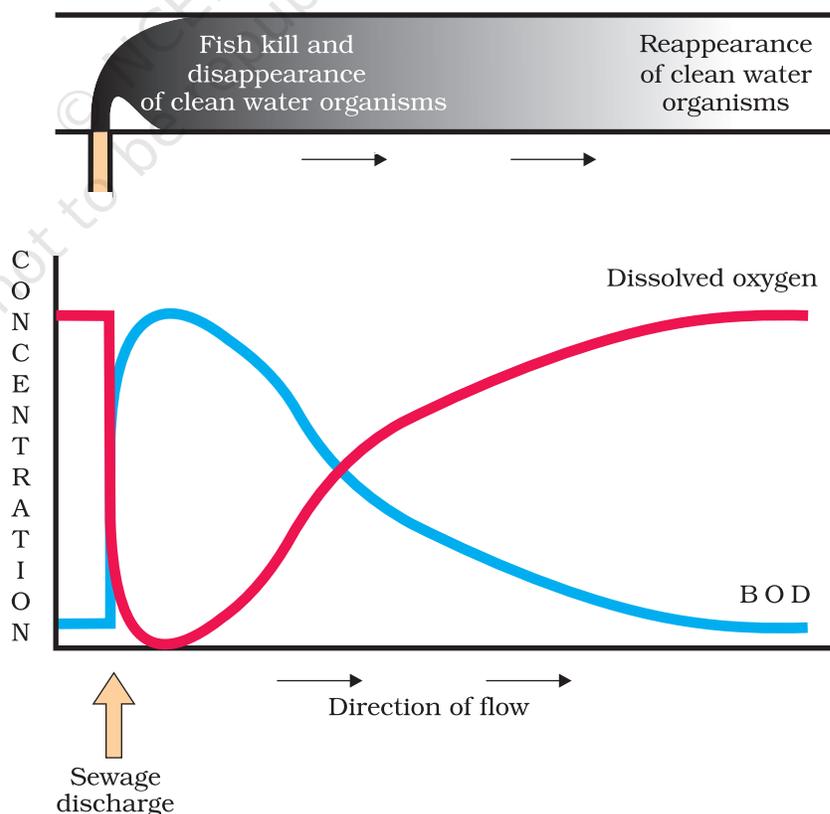


Figure 16.3 Effect of sewage discharge on some important characteristics of a river



dissolved salts such as nitrates, phosphates, and other nutrients, and toxic metal ions and organic compounds. Domestic sewage primarily contains biodegradable organic matter, which readily decomposes – thanks to bacteria and other micro-organisms, which can multiply using these organic substances as substrates and hence utilise some of the components of sewage. It is possible to estimate the amount of biodegradable organic matter in sewage water by measuring **Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD)**. *Can you explain how?* In the chapter on micro-organisms you have read about the relation between BOD, micro-organisms and the amount of biodegradable matter.

Figure 16.3 shows some of the changes that one may notice following discharge of sewage into a river. Micro-organisms involved in biodegradation of organic matter in the receiving water body consume a lot of oxygen, and as a result there is a sharp decline in dissolved oxygen downstream from the point of sewage discharge. This causes mortality of fish and other aquatic creatures.

Presence of large amounts of nutrients in waters also causes excessive growth of **planktonic** (free-floating) algae, called an **algal bloom** (Figure 16.4) which imparts a distinct colour to the water bodies. Algal blooms cause deterioration of the water quality and fish mortality. Some bloom-forming algae are extremely toxic to human beings and animals.

You may have seen the beautiful mauve-colored flowers found on very appealingly-shaped floating plants in water bodies. These plants which were introduced into India for their lovely flowers have caused havoc by their excessive growth by causing blocks in our waterways. They grow faster than our ability to remove them. These are plants of water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), the world's most problematic aquatic weed, also



Figure 16.4 Pictorial view of an algal bloom

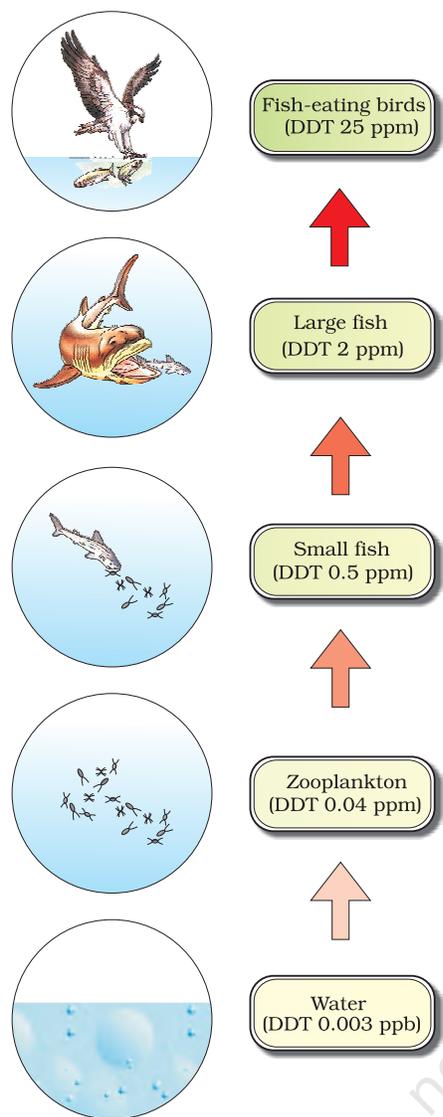


Figure 16.5 Biomagnification of DDT in an aquatic food chain

called 'Terror of Bengal'. They grow abundantly in eutrophic water bodies, and lead to an imbalance in the ecosystem dynamics of the water body.

Sewage from our homes as well as from hospitals are likely to contain many undesirable pathogenic microorganisms, and its disposal into a water without proper treatment may cause outbreak of serious diseases, such as, dysentery, typhoid, jaundice, cholera, etc.

Unlike domestic sewage, waste water from industries like petroleum, paper manufacturing, metal extraction and processing, chemical manufacturing, etc., often contain toxic substances, notably, heavy metals (defined as elements with density $> 5 \text{ g/cm}^3$ such as mercury, cadmium, copper, lead, etc.) and a variety of organic compounds.

A few toxic substances, often present in industrial waste waters, can undergo biological magnification (**Biomagnification**) in the aquatic food chain. Biomagnification refers to increase in concentration of the toxicant at successive trophic levels. This happens because a toxic substance accumulated by an organism cannot be metabolised or excreted, and is thus passed on to the next higher trophic level. This phenomenon is well-known for mercury and DDT. Figure 16.5 shows biomagnification of DDT in an aquatic food chain. In this manner, the concentration of DDT is increased at successive trophic levels; say if it starts at 0.003 ppb (ppb = parts per billion) in water, it can ultimately reach 25 ppm (ppm = parts per million) in fish-eating birds, through biomagnification. High concentrations of DDT disturb calcium metabolism in birds, which causes thinning of eggshell and their premature breaking, eventually causing decline in bird populations.

Eutrophication is the natural aging of a lake by nutrient enrichment of its water. In a young lake the water is cold and clear, supporting little life. With time, streams draining into the lake introduce nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus, which encourage the growth of aquatic organisms. As the lake's fertility increases, plant and animal life burgeons, and organic remains begin to be deposited on the lake bottom. Over the centuries, as silt and organic debris pile up, the lake grows shallower and warmer, with warm-water organisms supplanting those that thrive in a cold environment. Marsh plants take root in the shallows and begin to fill in the original lake basin. Eventually, the lake gives way to large masses of floating plants (bog), finally converting into land. Depending on climate, size of the lake and other factors, the



natural aging of a lake may span thousands of years. However, pollutants from man's activities like effluents from the industries and homes can radically accelerate the aging process. This phenomenon has been called **Cultural or Accelerated Eutrophication**. During the past century, lakes in many parts of the earth have been severely eutrophied by sewage and agricultural and industrial wastes. The prime contaminants are nitrates and phosphates, which act as plant nutrients. They overstimulate the growth of algae, causing unsightly scum and unpleasant odours, and robbing the water of dissolved oxygen vital to other aquatic life. At the same time, other pollutants flowing into a lake may poison whole populations of fish, whose decomposing remains further deplete the water's dissolved oxygen content. In such fashion, a lake can literally choke to death.

Heated (thermal) wastewaters flowing out of electricity-generating units, e.g., thermal power plants, constitute another important category of pollutants. Thermal wastewater eliminates or reduces the number of organisms sensitive to high temperature, and may enhance the growth of plants and fish in extremely cold areas but, only after causing damage to the indigenous flora and fauna.

16.2.2 A Case Study of Integrated Waste Water Treatment

Wastewater including sewage can be treated in an integrated manner, by utilising a mix of artificial and natural processes. An example of such an initiative is the town of Arcata, situated along the northern coast of California. Collaborating with biologists from the Humboldt State University, the townspeople created an integrated waste water treatment process within a natural system. The cleaning occurs in two stages – (a) the conventional sedimentation, filtering and chlorine treatments are given. After this stage, lots of dangerous pollutants like dissolved heavy metals still remain. To combat this, an innovative approach was taken and (b) the biologists developed a series of six connected marshes over 60 hectares of marshland. Appropriate plants, algae, fungi and bacteria were seeded into this area, which neutralise, absorb and assimilate the pollutants. Hence, as the water flows through the marshes, it gets purified naturally.

The marshes also constitute a sanctuary, with a high level of biodiversity in the form of fishes, animals and birds that now reside there. A citizens group called Friends of the Arcata Marsh (FOAM) are responsible for the upkeep and safeguarding of this wonderful project. .

All this time, we have assumed that removal of wastes requires water, i.e., the creation of sewage. But what if water is not necessary to dispose off human waste, like excreta? Can you imagine the amount of water that one can save if one didn't have to flush the toilet? Well, this is already a reality. Ecological sanitation is a sustainable system for handling human

excreta, using dry composting toilets. This is a practical, hygienic, efficient and cost-effective solution to human waste disposal. The key point to note here is that with this composting method, human excreta can be recycled into a resource (as natural fertiliser), which reduces the need for chemical fertilisers. There are working 'EcoSan' toilets in many areas of Kerala and Sri Lanka.

16.3 SOLID WASTES

Solid wastes refer to everything that goes out in trash. **Municipal solid wastes** are wastes from homes, offices, stores, schools, hospitals, etc., that are collected and disposed by the municipality. The municipal solid wastes generally comprise paper, food wastes, plastics, glass, metals, rubber, leather, textile, etc. Burning reduces the volume of the wastes, although it is generally not burnt to completion and open dumps often serve as the breeding ground for rats and flies. **Sanitary landfills** were adopted as the substitute for open-burning dumps. In a sanitary landfill, wastes are dumped in a depression or trench after compaction, and covered with dirt everyday. *If you live in a town or city, do you know where the nearest landfill site is?* Landfills are also not really much of a solution since the amount of garbage generation specially in the metros has increased so much that these sites are getting filled too. Also there is danger of seepage of chemicals, etc., from these landfills polluting the underground water resources.

A solution to all this can only be in human beings becoming more sensitive to these environment issues. All waste that we generate can be categorised into three types – (a) bio-degradable, (b) recyclable and (c) the non-biodegradable. It is important that all garbage generated is sorted. What can be reused or recycled should be separated out; our *kabadiwallahs* and rag-pickers do a great job of separation of materials for recycling. The biodegradable materials can be put into deep pits in the ground and be left for natural breakdown. That leaves only the non-biodegradable to be disposed off. The need to reduce our garbage generation should be a prime goal, instead, we are increasing the use of non-biodegradable products. Just pick any readymade packet of any 'good quality' eatable, say a biscuit packet, and study the packaging – do you see the number of protective layers used? Note that atleast one layer is of plastic. We have started packaging even our daily use products like milk and water in polybags!! In cities, fruits and vegetables can be bought packed in beautiful polysterene and plastic packaging – we pay so much and what do we do? Contribute heavily to environmental pollution. State Governments across the country are trying to push for reduction in use of plastics and use of eco-friendly packaging. We can do our bit by carrying cloth or other natural fibre carry-bags when we go shopping and by refusing polythene bags.



Hospitals generate hazardous wastes that contain disinfectants and other harmful chemicals, and also pathogenic micro-organisms. Such wastes also require careful treatment and disposal. The use of incinerators is crucial to disposal of hospital waste.

Irreparable computers and other electronic goods are known as **electronic wastes (e-wastes)**. E-wastes are buried in landfills or incinerated. Over half of the e-wastes generated in the developed world are exported to developing countries, mainly to China, India and Pakistan, where metals like copper, iron, silicon, nickel and gold are recovered during recycling process. Unlike developed countries, which have specifically built facilities for recycling of e-wastes, recycling in developing countries often involves manual participation thus exposing workers to toxic substances present in e-wastes. Recycling is the only solution for the treatment of e-waste, provided it is carried out in an environment-friendly manner.

16.3.1 Case Study of Remedy for Plastic Waste

A plastic sack manufacturer in Bangalore has managed to find the ideal solution to the ever-increasing problem of accumulating plastic waste. Ahmed Khan, aged 57 years old, has been producing plastic sacks for 20 years. About 8 years ago, he realised that plastic waste was a real problem. Polyblend, a fine powder of recycled modified plastic, was developed then by his company. This mixture is mixed with the bitumen that is used to lay roads. In collaboration with R.V.College of Engineering and the Bangalore City Corporation, Ahmed Khan proved that blends of Polyblend and bitumen, when used to lay roads, enhanced the bitumen's water repellent properties, and helped to increase road life by a factor of three. The raw material for creating Polyblend is any plastic film waste. So, against the price of Rs. 0.40 per kg that rag pickers had been getting for plastic waste, Khan now offers Rs.6. Using Khan's technique, by the year 2002, more than 40 kms of road in Bangalore has already been laid. At this rate, Khan will soon be running short of plastic waste in Bangalore, to produce Polyblend. Thanks to innovations like Polyblend, we might still avoid being smothered by plastic waste.

16.4 AGRO-CHEMICALS AND THEIR EFFECTS

In the wake of green revolution, use of inorganic fertilisers and pesticides has increased manifold for enhancing crop production. Pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, etc., are being increasingly used. These incidentally, are also toxic to non-target organisms, that are important components of the soil ecosystem. Do you think these can be biomagnified in the terrestrial ecosystems? We know what the addition of increasing amounts of chemical fertilisers can do to aquatic ecosystems vis-à-vis eutrophication. The current problems in agriculture are, therefore, extremely grave.

16.4.1 Case Study of Organic Farming

Integrated organic farming is a cyclical, zero-waste procedure, where waste products from one process are cycled in as nutrients for other processes. This allows the maximum utilisation of resource and increases the efficiency of production. Ramesh Chandra Dagar, a farmer in Sonipat, Haryana, is doing just this. He includes bee-keeping, dairy management, water harvesting, composting and agriculture in a chain of processes, which support each other and allow an extremely economical and sustainable venture. There is no need to use chemical fertilisers for crops, as cattle excreta (dung) are used as manure. Crop waste is used to create compost, which can be used as a natural fertiliser or can be used to generate natural gas for satisfying the energy needs of the farm. Enthusiastic about spreading information and help on the practice of integrated organic farming, Dagar has created the Haryana Kisan Welfare Club, with a current membership of 5000 farmers.

16.5 RADIOACTIVE WASTES

Initially, nuclear energy was hailed as a non-polluting way for generating electricity. Later on, it was realised that the use of nuclear energy has two very serious inherent problems. The first is accidental leakage, as occurred in the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl incidents and the second is safe disposal of radioactive wastes.

Radiation, that is given off by nuclear waste is extremely damaging to organisms, because it causes mutations at a very high rate. At high doses, nuclear radiation is lethal but at lower doses, it creates various disorders, the most frequent of all being cancer. Therefore, nuclear waste is an extremely potent pollutant and has to be dealt with utmost caution.

It has been recommended that storage of nuclear waste, after sufficient pre-treatment, should be done in suitably shielded containers buried within the rocks, about 500 m deep below the earth's surface. However, this method of disposal is meeting stiff opposition from the public. *Why do you think this method of disposal is not agreeable to many people?*

16.6 GREENHOUSE EFFECT AND GLOBAL WARMING

The term 'Greenhouse effect' has been derived from a phenomenon that occurs in a greenhouse. Have you ever seen a greenhouse? It looks like a small glass house and is used for growing plants especially during winter. In a greenhouse the glass panel lets the light in, but does not allow heat to escape. Therefore, the greenhouse warms up, very much like inside a car that has been parked in the sun for a few hours.

The greenhouse effect is a naturally occurring phenomenon that is responsible for heating of Earth's surface and atmosphere. You would be

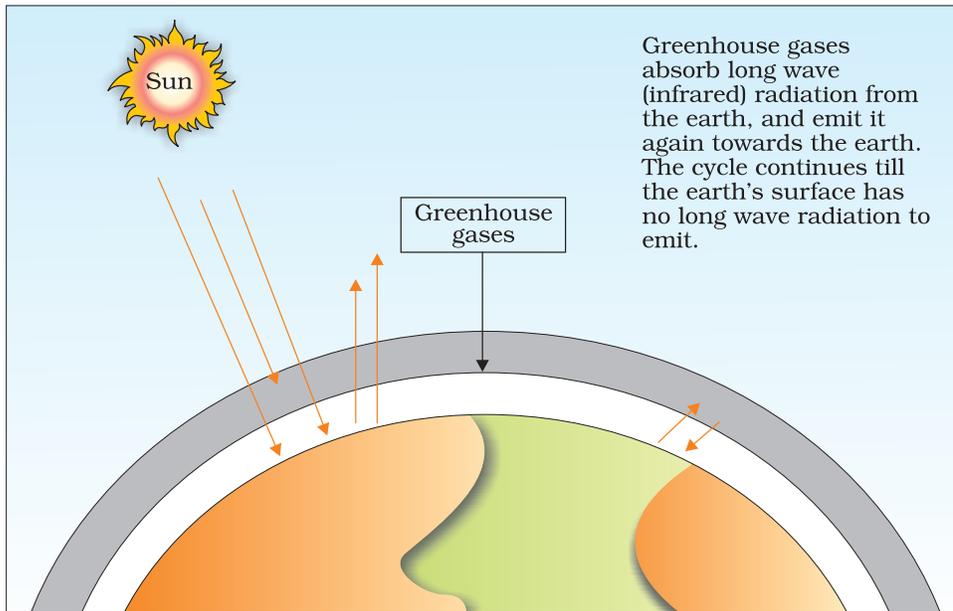


Figure 16.6 Sunlight energy at the outermost atmosphere

surprised to know that without greenhouse effect the average temperature at surface of Earth would have been a chilly -18°C rather than the present average of 15°C . In order to understand the greenhouse effect, it is necessary to know the fate of the energy of sunlight that reaches the outermost atmosphere (Figure 16.6). Clouds and gases reflect about one-fourth of the incoming solar radiation, and absorb some of it but almost half of incoming solar radiation falls on Earth's surface heating it, while a small proportion is reflected back. Earth's surface re-emits heat in the form of infrared radiation but part of this does not escape into space as atmospheric gases (e.g., carbon dioxide, methane, etc.) absorb a major fraction of it. The molecules of these gases radiate heat energy, and a major part of which again comes to Earth's surface, thus heating it up once again. This cycle is repeated many a times. The above-mentioned gases – carbon dioxide and methane – are commonly known as greenhouse gases (Figure 16.7) because they are responsible for the greenhouse effect.

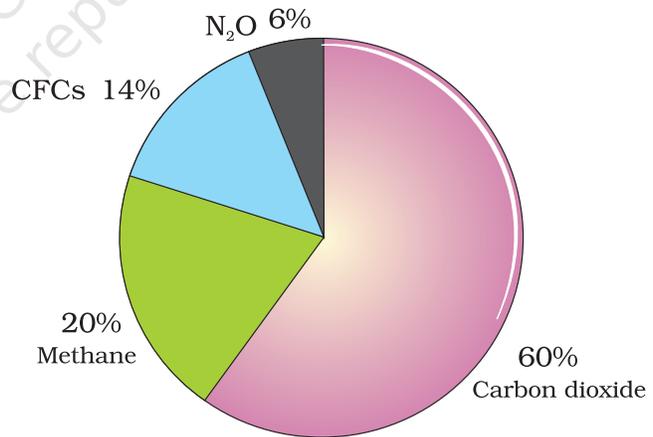


Figure 16.7 Relative contribution of various greenhouse gases to total global warming

Increase in the level of greenhouse gases has led to considerable heating of Earth leading to global warming. During the past century, the temperature of Earth has increased by 0.6°C , most of it during the last

three decades. Scientists believe that this rise in temperature is leading to deleterious changes in the environment and resulting in odd climatic changes (e.g. El Nino effect) , thus leading to increased melting of polar ice caps as well as of other places like the Himalayan snow caps. Over many years, this will result in a rise in sea level that can submerge many coastal areas. The total spectrum of changes that global warming can bring about is a subject that is still under active research.

How can we control global warming? The measures include cutting down use of fossil fuel, improving efficiency of energy usage, reducing deforestation, planting trees and slowing down the growth of human population. International initiatives are also being taken to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

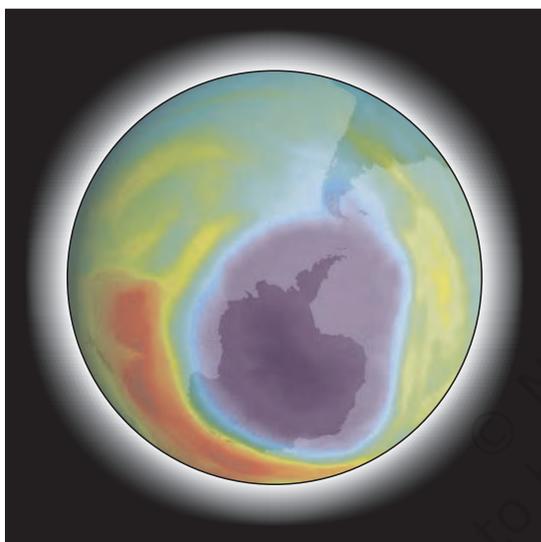


Figure 16.8 Ozone hole is the area above Antarctica, shown in purple colour, where the ozone layer is the thinnest. Ozone thickness is given in Dobson unit (see carefully the scale shown in colour violet to red). The ozone hole over Antarctica develops each year between late August and early October. *Courtesy: NASA*

16.7 OZONE DEPLETION IN THE STRATOSPHERE

You have earlier studied in the Chemistry textbook of Class XI about ‘bad’ ozone, formed in the lower atmosphere (troposphere) that harms plants and animals. There is ‘good’ ozone also; this ozone is found in the upper part of the atmosphere called the **stratosphere**, and it acts as a shield absorbing ultraviolet radiation from the sun. UV rays are highly injurious to living organisms since DNA and proteins of living organisms preferentially absorb UV rays, and its high energy breaks the chemical bonds within these molecules. The thickness of the ozone in a column of air from the ground to the top of the atmosphere is measured in terms of **Dobson units (DU)**.

Ozone gas is continuously formed by the action of UV rays on molecular oxygen, and also degraded into molecular oxygen in the stratosphere. There should be a balance between production and degradation of ozone in the stratosphere. Of late, the balance has been disrupted due to enhancement of ozone degradation by **chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)**.

CFCs find wide use as refrigerants. CFCs discharged in the lower part of atmosphere move upward and reach stratosphere. In stratosphere, UV rays act on them releasing Cl atoms. Cl degrades ozone releasing molecular oxygen, with these atoms acting merely as catalysts; Cl atoms are not consumed in the reaction. Hence, whatever CFCs are added to the stratosphere, they have permanent and continuing effects on Ozone



levels. Although ozone depletion is occurring widely in the stratosphere, the depletion is particularly marked over the Antarctic region. This has resulted in formation of a large area of thinned ozone layer, commonly called as the **ozone hole** (Figure 16.8).

UV radiation of wavelengths shorter than UV-B, are almost completely absorbed by Earth's atmosphere, given that the ozone layer is intact. But, UV-B damages DNA and mutation may occur. It causes aging of skin, damage to skin cells and various types of skin cancers. In human eye, cornea absorbs UV-B radiation, and a high dose of UV-B causes inflammation of cornea, called **snow-blindness**, cataract, etc. Such exposure may permanently damage the cornea.

Recognising the deleterious affects of ozone depletion, an international treaty, known as the **Montreal Protocol**, was signed at Montreal (Canada) in 1987 (effective in 1989) to control the emission of ozone depleting substances. Subsequently many more efforts have been made and protocols have laid down definite roadmaps, separately for developed and developing countries, for reducing the emission of CFCs and other ozone depleting chemicals.

16.8 DEGRADATION BY IMPROPER RESOURCE UTILISATION AND MAINTENANCE

The degradation of natural resources can occur, not just by the action of pollutants but also by improper resource utilisation practices.

Soil erosion and desertification: The development of the fertile top-soil takes centuries. But, it can be removed very easily due to human activities like over-cultivation, unrestricted grazing, deforestation and poor irrigation practices, resulting in arid patches of land. When large barren patches extend and meet over time, a desert is created. Internationally, it has been recognised that desertification is a major problem nowadays, particularly due to increased urbanisation.

Waterlogging and soil salinity: Irrigation without proper drainage of water leads to waterlogging in the soil. Besides affecting the crops, waterlogging draws salt to the surface of the soil. The salt then is deposited as a thin crust on the land surface or starts collecting at the roots of the plants. This increased salt content is inimical to the growth of crops and is extremely damaging to agriculture. Waterlogging and soil salinity are some of the problems that have come in the wake of the Green Revolution.

16.9 DEFORESTATION

Deforestation is the conversion of forested areas to non-forested ones. According to an estimate, almost 40 per cent forests have been lost in the tropics, compared to only 1 per cent in the temperate region. The present scenario of deforestation is particularly grim in India. At the beginning of

the twentieth century, forests covered about 30 per cent of the land of India. By the end of the century, it shrunk to 21.54 per cent, whereas the National Forest Policy (1988) of India has recommended 33 per cent forest cover for the plains and 67 per cent for the hills.

How does deforestation occur? A number of human activities contribute to it. One of the major reasons is the conversion of forest to agricultural land so as to feed the growing human population. Trees are axed for timber, firewood, cattle ranching and for several other purposes. **Slash and burn agriculture**, commonly called as **Jhum cultivation** in the north-eastern states of India, has also contributed to deforestation. In slash and burn agriculture, the farmers cut down the trees of the forest and burn the plant remains. The ash is used as a fertiliser and the land is then used for farming or cattle grazing. After cultivation, the area is left for several years so as to allow its recovery. The farmers then move on to other areas and repeat this process. In earlier days, when Jhum cultivation was in prevalence, enough time-gap was given so that the land recovered from the effect of cultivation. With increasing population, and repeated cultivation, this recovery phase is done away with, resulting in deforestation.

What are the consequences of deforestation? One of the major effects is enhanced carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere because trees that could hold a lot of carbon in their biomass are lost with deforestation. Deforestation also causes loss of biodiversity due to habitat destruction, disturbs hydrologic cycle, causes soil erosion, and may lead to desertification in extreme cases.

Reforestation is the process of restoring a forest that once existed but was removed at some point of time in the past. Reforestation may occur naturally in a deforested area. However, we can speed it up by planting trees with due consideration to biodiversity that earlier existed in that area.

16.9.1 Case Study of People's Participation in Conservation of Forests

People's participation has a long history in India. In 1731, the king of Jodhpur in Rajasthan asked one of his ministers to arrange wood for constructing a new palace. The minister and workers went to a forest near a village, inhabited by Bishnois, to cut down trees. The Bishnoi community is known for its peaceful co-existence with nature. The effort to cut down trees by the kings was thwarted by the Bishnois. A Bishnoi woman Amrita Devi showed exemplary courage by hugging a tree and daring king's men to cut her first before cutting the tree. The tree mattered much more to her than her own life. Sadly, the king's men did not heed to her pleas, and cut down the tree along with Amrita Devi. Her three daughters and hundreds of other Bishnois followed her, and thus lost their lives saving trees. Nowhere in history do we find a commitment of



this magnitude when human beings sacrificed their lives for the cause of the environment. The Government of India has recently instituted the **Amrita Devi Bishnoi Wildlife Protection Award** for individuals or communities from rural areas that have shown extraordinary courage and dedication in protecting wildlife.

You may have heard of the **Chipko Movement** of Garhwal Himalayas. In 1974, local women showed enormous bravery in protecting trees from the axe of contractors by hugging them. People all over the world have acclaimed the Chipko movement.

Realising the significance of participation by local communities, the Government of India in 1980s has introduced the concept of **Joint Forest Management (JFM)** so as to work closely with the local communities for protecting and managing forests. In return for their services to the forest, the communities get benefit of various forest products (e.g., fruits, gum, rubber, medicine, etc.), and thus the forest can be conserved in a sustainable manner.

SUMMARY

Major issues relating to environmental pollution and depletion of valuable natural resources vary in dimension from local, regional to global levels. Air pollution primarily results from burning of fossil fuel, e.g., coal and petroleum, in industries and in automobiles. They are harmful to humans, animals and plants, and therefore must be removed to keep our air clean. Domestic sewage, the most common source of pollution of water bodies, reduces dissolved oxygen but increases biochemical oxygen demand of receiving water. Domestic sewage is rich in nutrients, especially, nitrogen and phosphorus, which cause eutrophication and nuisance creating algal blooms. Industrial waste waters are often rich in toxic chemicals, especially heavy metals and organic compounds. Industrial waste waters harm living organisms. Municipal solid wastes also create problems and must be disposed off in landfills. Disposal of hazardous wastes like defunct ships, radioactive wastes and e-wastes requires additional efforts. Soil pollution primarily results from agricultural chemicals (e.g., pesticides) and leachates from solid wastes deposited over it.

Two major environmental issues of global nature are increasing greenhouse effect, which is warming Earth, and depletion of ozone in the stratosphere. Enhanced greenhouse effect is mainly due to increased emission of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and CFCs., and also due to deforestation. It may drastically change rainfall pattern, global temperature, besides deleteriously affecting living organisms. Ozone in the stratosphere, which protects us from harmful effects of ultraviolet radiation, is depleting fast due to emission of CFCs thus increasing the risks of skin cancer, mutation and other disorders.



EXERCISES

1. What are the various constituents of domestic sewage? Discuss the effects of sewage discharge on a river.
2. List all the wastes that you generate, at home, school or during your trips to other places. Could you very easily reduce the generation of these wastes? Which would be difficult or rather impossible to reduce?
3. Discuss the causes and effects of global warming. What measures need to be taken to control global warming?
4. Match the items given in column A and B:

Column A

- (a) Catalytic converter
- (b) Electrostatic precipitator
- (c) Earmuffs
- (d) Landfills

Column B

- (i) Particulate matter
- (ii) Carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides
- (iii) High noise level
- (iv) Solid wastes

5. Write critical notes on the following:
 - (a) Eutrophication
 - (b) Biological magnification
 - (c) Groundwater depletion and ways for its replenishment
6. Why does ozone hole form over Antarctica? How will enhanced ultraviolet radiation affect us?
7. Discuss the role of women and communities in protection and conservation of forests.
8. What measures, as an individual, would you take to reduce environmental pollution?
9. Discuss briefly the following:
 - (a) Radioactive wastes
 - (b) Defunct ships and e-wastes
 - (c) Municipal solid wastes
10. What initiatives were taken for reducing vehicular air pollution in Delhi? Has air quality improved in Delhi?
11. Discuss briefly the following:
 - (a) Greenhouse gases
 - (b) Catalytic converter
 - (c) Ultraviolet B