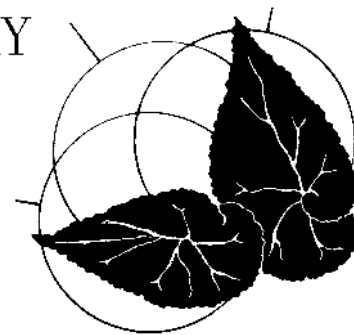


NEW ENGLAND TROPICAL CONSERVATORY



Fact Sheet **3** What are Habitats and Ecosystems?

What is a habitat?

A *habitat* is a place where an animal or plant lives. All plants and animals have basic requirements of food, water, shelter and space, including humans. A collective area where all of these needs can be met is called a habitat. Each species of plant and animal has their own habitat because all species have different needs, but their individual habitats can overlap with others because many plants and animals have similar needs. For example, our neighborhood forest may be a perfect place for white tail deer but it is also suitable for maple trees and gray squirrels. However, a typical forest in the Northeast would not be suitable for lions or a palm trees. Our neighborhood forests are habitat for deer, maple trees and squirrels.

Let's keep using the neighborhood forest as an example to explain more terms.



If our forest has a permanent wet, marshy area or a vernal pool, then it would also become good habitat for frogs, mosquitoes and other animals and insects that breed in water. Wet areas in the forest also provide habitat for plants that like wet soils such as skunk cabbage, blueberry bushes, and red maple trees.

If the forest had a stream, it would be a good habitat for trout.

By simply adding a marshy area and a stream we've increased the number of species that consider our forest to be a good habitat. With this increase in diversity, we've made a good habitat for larger animals that need a lot of different types of food to survive, like black bears.

However, if we take away just one of those elements, for example trout, we may change the environment in such way that it is less likely to support a population of bears. With the absence of trout we've degraded our bear habitat. With less bear the blueberry bushes will not be eaten as much. The blueberry bushes will thrive and grow so lush they may even crowd out the skunk cabbage.

In this example, we drastically reduced the diversity of species in our forest by taking away only one species. This is an example of how all habitats are connected. It's the combination of habitats and the plants and animals that live in them that create what we call an *ecosystem*. An ecosystem may be as small as your neighborhood forest, or it may include an area the size of the entire state.

When we affect one habitat, we set off a chain of reactions that can affect the plants and animals miles and miles away from us. Each and every person plays a role in nature.



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