

Life 3 metres underground. Is it for you?

Prairie dogs are chubby rodents that scuttle around on the ground in what is left of the prairies. Their behaviour makes them interesting animals for students to watch, and draws them in to discussing fundamental ideas of saving the planet.

The video is a very good example of how to use an interesting animal in order to study food chains and how animals are adapted to the environment and how they have nearly been exterminated for no good reason.

1. Watch the video

During the video students should listen and watch carefully and write down answers to these questions:

- (a) why do prairie dogs live together? (protection)
- (b) why do they live in burrows as deep as 3m from the surface? (deep winter frozen ground)
- (c) What did farmers misunderstand? (they imagined they were a pest)

At the end, if the students are not sure of all the answers, play the video again. Use this as an opportunity to say: "Have you got at least one answer? Well, let's just concentrate on what we don't yet know and watch again."

That is, familiarity with information will allow you to get more from it. Students should always see the point of reading, listening or watching something containing information more than once. That is good research technique.

Please now focus on food chains in your discussion.

From these three simple questions they will have understood

- (a) That animals live together for a purpose: often those in the middle of food chains need to worry about those higher up
- (b) that animals are adapted to their environment (habitat) and their position in it (food chain). make sure they use the words environment and habitat. Remind students that they are looking at the animals in summer, so you cannot draw all the inferences you need about lifestyle from just one short observation. Ask: why are we not taking these videos in winter? (because the animals are 3m below the surface, and in any case the land is covered with snow)
- (c) That people often do not always see the value of other living things because they have not taken the trouble to understand them properly. So farmers saw a pest without realising they were a keystone species. This is an important conservation and stewardship idea that you should discuss further with your class.

Related source books: Creative topic: Grassland life

Science at school 4B Habitats

Extended work: Students can write a short letter to a hedgehog written from a prairie dog town telling of what life is like for them.