

The most important animals on the planet

Time	30-45 minutes
Interaction	groupwork
Level	A2 (Pre-int.) to B2 (Upper Int.)

Language areas practised

Sub-skills and Functions

- predicting
- recounting factual information

Grammar and Lexis

- past and present simple tenses
- animals, the environment, science

Preparation

Photocopy the Activity Sheet below, and the 3 texts (1 of each per group of 3-4 students). Cut up as indicated.

Procedure

1. Which animals do you think are important?: Hand out copies of the activity sheet (1 per group of 3-4 students) and

begin with activity 1 (Which animals do you think are important?), in which students brainstorm important animals. Get feedback, including reasons.

2. Vocabulary check: Students check vocabulary in their groups with teacher support as required.

3. Read and retell: Explain that each student will read 1/3 of a text on the mystery animal, and then retell it. Hand out the texts, 1 each (if you have 4 or 5 students in a group, 2 group members can share the same text). After reading, students should retell what they read from memory (without showing it or reading it out loud).

4. True or false: Groups work together to check the True / False questions. Answers: 1. T; 2. T; 3. F (also domestic animals); 4. F (they usually bury it); 5. T; 6. T; 7. F (they attack cows and people); 8. T; 9. T; 10. F (20).

5. What do you think? Groups discuss the questions. If you have internet access, they will all enjoy watching a few YouTube videos of dung beetles rolling poo around!

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1. Which animals do you think are important?

Working in groups, make a list of animals that you think are important, either to people or to the world we live in.

2. Vocabulary check

You are going to read about an insect that *may* be the most important animal in the world. Before you read, check the following words. Can you guess what the animal is, and what it does?

species (n) bury (v) dung (n) fertile (adj) soil (n)
ecosystem (n) pest (n) roll (v) nutrition (n)

3. Read and retell

Your teacher will give you part of the text about this animal. Read it and check that you can answer the question at the top of your handout. Then tell the members of your other group about your text in your own words.

4. True or false

Work as a group. Using the information in your texts, decide if these sentences are true or false:

1. Dung beetles are flying insects.
2. One species of dung beetle eats only human dung.

3. Dung beetles are only found in places where there are lots of wild animals.
4. Dung beetles fly away with the dung.
5. They bury dung underground.
6. The beetles help grass to grow.
7. Buffalo fly and bush fly attack dung beetles.
8. Native Australian dung beetles don't like the dung of cows or sheep.
9. Farmers had to wear cork hats to keep the flies away.
10. Scientists found 45 species of foreign dung beetle that could survive in Australia.

5. What do you think?

Discuss:

- Do you agree with the author that dung beetles are important?
- Do you think the scientists did the right thing, or was it dangerous to do this? Why?
- Do you know any other stories about how making a change to an ecosystem can cause problems?

Finally, try Googling 'dung beetle' to find some videos of these amazing animals at work!

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Text A: What are dung beetles, and where do they live?



A dung beetle looking for food

Dung beetles are small flying insects that usually live in holes underground. They range in size from a few millimetres to several centimetres. There are about 7,000 species of dung beetles around the world and they are important to ecosystems wherever they live. However, they are most important in places where there are lots of large animals that produce dung. The savannahs of Africa are home to the widest variety of dung beetles, because there are so many large animals there, such as elephants, buffalo and antelope. Even in Europe, farmers know that cows and sheep do better in fields where there are more dung beetles, so they're also important to farming. There is even a species that depends on what human produce, called *Onthophagus caenobita*. Can you guess what dung beetles do?

Text B: What do dung beetles do, and why are they so important?

Dung beetles fly around looking for the dung of large animals, especially mammals. When they find fresh dung, first they eat some of it (there's nutrition in poo), and then they usually break off a piece of dung, roll it into a ball, and push it to a safe place, where they bury it underground. Finally, they lay their eggs on the dung. When the babies are born, they find their first meal waiting for them! On the African savannah, a kilo of elephant dung can disappear in just two hours, and provide food to over 16,000 dung beetles! By removing the dung, the beetles leave space for fresh grass to grow. More importantly, by burying the dung underground, they are putting lots of nutrition back where it came from, and this makes the soil more fertile. But what do you think happens when dung beetles can't do their job?



A dung beetle rolling a dung ball

Text C: What happens when dung beetles can't do their job?

Before Europeans arrived in Australia, the native dung beetles ate the dry dung of kangaroos and other marsupials. The Europeans brought cows and sheep, which produced wet dung that Australian dung beetles didn't like, so the fields quickly became covered in dung. The grass stopped growing and two species of fly (buffalo fly and bush fly) began to eat and breed on the dung. Both these species are pests that attack cows and people. They became so common on farms that Australian farmers had to wear 'cork hats' to keep the flies away. To try to solve this problem, scientists began to import foreign dung beetles and released them on Australian farms. Of the 45 species that they tried, 20 did well. The new beetles began to bury the dung, so fly numbers fell and the fields became fertile again. Since then, the traditional cork hats have become a symbol of Australia. But let us not forget that these hats are also a warning sign for the future: If we don't protect dung beetles, we might need cork hats all over the world!



An Australian cork hat
By Tfarrell6, via Wikimedia Commons