

# An African Food Chain

By Cindy Grigg

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One day on the African savanna, a group of female lions was hunting. Keeping their tawny bodies low to the ground of the flat, grassy plains, the lionesses slowly crept through the tall grass. They were stalking a small herd of giraffes that was grazing on the leaves of an acacia tree. One of the giraffes wasn't eating. It stood with the others, but its head was not reaching for leaves.

The lionesses slinked silently through the slithery grass, surrounding the giraffes. The lionesses knew they had to get as close as they could before the giraffes saw, heard, or smelled them. One of the giraffes suddenly moved away from the trees. It must have sensed the lions! Quickly the lions shot out of the grass. They teamed up to attack the sickly giraffe. Two lions bit at the giraffe's back legs. One lion jumped at the giraffe's back. It quickly fell. Another lion pounced on its throat. The giraffe was killed almost instantly.



The male lion, protector of the pride, came to feed on the giraffe first. Even though the lionesses did the hunting, they stepped away from the kill and allowed the male to take what he wanted first. A group of vultures flew into the acacia trees. They waited for the lions' leftovers.

After the male lion was finished, the lionesses came to eat. Cubs waited impatiently nearby. They had to wait until the adults were full before they could eat. When it seemed the females' feeding had slowed down a bit, one of the cubs rushed forward to grab some food. The other cubs watched to see what would happen to it. If the female lions let it eat, they would rush in, too. The giraffe provided enough food for all the lions of this pride - and more animals, too.

Like the hungry cubs, the vultures could wait no longer. They flew and landed one by one nearby and walked toward the kill. One of the cubs ripped off a piece of the giraffe's flesh and took it to a safer place to finish eating. The other cubs just ate faster. They shared their food with the vultures. The vultures squawked and flapped their wings. The noise alerted a trio of hyenas that was wandering nearby.

The hyenas, lacking good manners, rushed in to feast on the giraffe's remains. They chased away the vultures because they wanted it all for themselves! Vultures and hyenas are both scavengers. They often follow large carnivores like the lions and eat their leftovers. Scavengers also eat animals that die of old age or sickness. They are like nature's clean-up crew. They fill a niche in their habitat by cleaning up the remains of dead animals.

The hyenas ate their fill and trotted away. The vultures, who had been perched in the nearby trees, returned to finish off the remains. After the scavengers got through, not much of the giraffe was left but bits of skin and some bones. But that's not the end of the story.

Insects came to eat the skin. Some insects laid eggs on what was left. Once the eggs hatch, the insect larva will feed on the bits of skin. Even the last remaining parts of the giraffe won't go to waste. Bacteria, worms, and fungi will feed on them. They are decomposers that break down the remains and return nutrients to the soil. Minerals like calcium and iron from the bones will dissolve in the rain and go into the soil, too. Plant roots will take up water containing the minerals and nutrients. Plants will grow and make more leaves, seeds, and fruits. These will become food for more animals.

This story tells of one food chain in the African savanna. It began with the leaves of the acacia tree. The tree, a producer like all green plants, used sunlight to make its food. It stored some of the food energy in its tissues. All animals are consumers who must eat food to get energy. The giraffes are herbivores, animals that eat only plants. They are primary consumers that ate the leaves to get stored energy. The giraffes stored some of the food energy in their body tissues. The lions ate the giraffe. The lions were the top predators because not many animals eat lions. If a lion died of old age, the scavengers (vultures and hyenas) and the decomposers (insects, worms, bacteria, and

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fungi) might feed on it. Its remains will return to the soil, and plants will use the nutrients to grow more plants. Decomposers connect the top and the bottom of the food chain. The food chain will begin again.

The African savanna, like most habitats, is the home of many kinds of plants and animals. Most plants and animals are part of more than one food chain. The leaves of the acacia tree might be eaten by a caterpillar. A small bird might eat the caterpillar. An eagle might eat the small bird. Lions eat antelopes and zebras, as well as giraffes.

Plants are almost always the beginning of a food chain on land. Plants are producers that use energy from the sun to make their own food. Then consumers eat producers. Herbivores, animals that eat only plants, come along and feed on plant leaves, seeds, and fruits. Carnivores, animals that eat meat, feed on herbivores. Predators hunt and kill their food. Scavengers feed on dead animals. Larger carnivores eat smaller carnivores and herbivores. Decomposers break down the tissues of dead plants and animals. A simple chain doesn't show all the relationships among all the foods and the eaters of the foods. Instead, a food web shows the links that connect many food chains of the plants and animals within a habitat.

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which word or words in the story help the reader know what a savanna is?
- A. African
  - B. acacia tree
  - C. flat, grassy plains
  - D. a small herd
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The lionesses slinked silently through the slithery grass to surround the giraffes. This sentence is an example of which type of figurative language?
- A. metaphor
  - B. alliteration
  - C. hyperbole
  - D. simile
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. It must have sensed the lions! Which of the answer choices best fits the meaning of the word "sensed" in this sentence?
- A. detected by hearing, seeing, smelling, etc.
  - B. understood the meaning of
  - C. showed good judgment
  - D. none of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In paragraph one, what can the reader infer about the giraffe that wasn't eating?
- A. It just wasn't hungry.
  - B. It was a baby giraffe.
  - C. It wasn't eating because it was looking out for the herd.
  - D. It might be old or sick.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. \_\_\_\_\_ fill a niche in their habitat by cleaning up the remains of dead animals.
- A. Herbivores
  - B. Producers
  - C. Carnivores
  - D. Scavengers

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\_\_\_\_\_ 6. \_\_\_\_\_ are animals that eat only plants.

- A. Decomposers
- B. Scavengers
- C. Herbivores
- D. Carnivores

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. Lions are \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. consumers
- B. top predators
- C. carnivores
- D. all of the above

**Write a sentence that tells the meaning of each of the following words: producer, consumer, herbivore, carnivore, predator, scavenger, and decomposer.**

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**Write your own food chain story that takes place in a different habitat. Some habitats to choose are ocean, tundra, desert, and freshwater. Include a producer, an herbivore, and at least one carnivore in your story.**

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