SECTION 2

What You Will Learn

- Describe the functions of producers, consumers, and decomposers in an ecosystem.
- Distinguish between a food chain and a food web.
- Explain how energy flows through a food web.
- Describe how the removal of one species affects the entire food web.

Vocabulary

herbivore food chain carnivore food web omnivore energy pyramid

READING STRATEGY

Reading Organizer As you read this section, make a table comparing producers, consumers, and decomposers.

Living Things Need Energy

Do you think you could survive on only water and vitamins? Eating food satisfies your hunger because it provides something you cannot live without—energy.

Living things need energy to survive. For example, black-tailed prairie dogs, which live in the grasslands of North America, eat grass and seeds to get the energy they need. Everything a prairie dog does requires energy. The same is true for the plants that grow in the grasslands where the prairie dogs live.

The Energy Connection

Organisms, in a prairie or any community, can be divided into three groups based on how they get energy. These groups are producers, consumers, and decomposers. Examine Figure 1 to see how energy passes through an ecosystem.

Producers

Organisms that use sunlight directly to make food are called producers. They do this by using a process called photosynthesis. Most producers are plants, but algae and some bacteria are also producers. Grasses are the main producers in a prairie ecosystem. Examples of producers in other ecosystems include cordgrass and algae in a salt marsh and trees in a forest. Algae are the main producers in the ocean.

Energy Sunlight is the source of energy for almost all living things.

> Producer Plants use the energy in sunlight to make food.

Figure 1 Living things get their energy either from the sun or from eating other organisms.

> Consumer The black-tailed prairie dog (herbivore) eats seeds and grass in the grasslands of western North America.

Consumer All of the prairie dogs in a colony watch for enemies, such as coyotes (carnivore), hawks, and badgers. Occasionally, a prairie dog is killed and eaten by a coyote.

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