

Lesson Six — My Community

Objective: Students will learn about members of their nonhuman community, some of whom they may already interact with and some they never see or barely notice.

Materials required:

Copies of the background information and true accounts below to hand out to students

Plastic milk crate or any sturdy crate, very approximately 40 x 40 x 40 cm

Background Information

Your local community includes wild and domestic beings you may interact with, either directly or indirectly. Domestic animals in your community may include dogs, cats, chickens, ornamental caged birds, fish, sheep, goats, or donkeys. Wild animals in your community may include lizards, birds, bats, or some species of deer.

Wild and domestic animals have many things in common. For example, all animals, from the smallest insect to the largest mammal, avoid harm or capture. Because they cannot speak in a language we understand, however, we often treat them as if they do not feel pain or have no feelings or thoughts about being captured or killed.

Some species of domestic animals, such as horses and donkeys, are owned by people who use them for work. Other domestic animal species, like some cats and dogs, have no home and do their best to survive on the streets. Some species, like ornamental birds, are not put to work, but are kept captive in cages, away from members of their own species and their natural habitat. They have either been bred in captivity or captured in the wild for profit.

Because we have domesticated these beings, it is important to consider our responsibility to make their lives as comfortable as possible and, when we can, choose their freedom over our wants.

Background About Wild Community Members

Approximately 500 million birds migrate to Europe and Asia from Africa. Many pass through Israel on their route. One of the most common birds migrating through your region is the Sylvia Warbler. These tiny birds migrate thousands of kilometers every spring and autumn. Many cross the Mediterranean Sea, the Sahara desert, and other large expanses of land or water where no food or fresh water is available. Their journey is becoming longer as a result of changes in the landscape brought about by global warming. A longer trip means they require more food — their fuel — to complete the journey. When sufficient food is unavailable, they and even their entire species may become extinct.

Bats are another member of the wild animal community in Israel. The most common species of bat in Israel is Kuhl's Pipistrelle. Bats are mammals, like us. They are the only true flying mammals. Instead of flapping their wings to fly like birds, bats use the webbing between their fingers.

Lift your hands and imagine your fingers are joined by webbing, and that you could fly just by moving your fingers, rather than your entire arms.

Bats eat insects, disperse seeds, and pollinate plants. Without bats and bees, we could not grow food to eat. The two greatest threats to bats are the widespread use of pesticides and being disturbed during their winter hibernation.

Background About Domestic Community Members

Dogs and Cats

Dogs and cats were domesticated by humans many centuries ago. In many parts of the world they are treated as pests, are not cared for, and are often abused. Dogs and cats are sensitive beings who suffer when their needs are not met.

Chickens

Chickens are smart, sensitive, brave, and caring. They can recognize the facial features of more than a hundred other chickens and remember them. They make more than thirty types of vocalizations that communicate a wealth of information to one another, including separate alarm calls depending on whether a predator is traveling by land or sea. They are good at solving problems.

In nature, chickens keep themselves and their environment clean, and if forced to choose between food and a clean space to live, they will choose a clean place to live. In most places where they are kept by humans, however, they do not have room to do what they do naturally, including spreading their wings, raising their young, scratching in the dirt, and cleaning themselves and their living space. The egg industry earns profits by selling eggs from female chickens. They cannot earn profits from male chicks, so they kill them soon after they are born.

Birds and Fish

Ornamental birds and fish kept in confinement are not given the freedom and space to use their bodies to their fullest. In the wild, they swim or fly many kilometers a day, have visual stimulation, and are free to move about and interact with their habitat in ways they cannot when confined to a cage, tank, or bowl. In captivity, they cannot eat the food they prefer or choose their companions and activities. Birds are our symbols of freedom. Most of us love their songs and their beauty, but we often fail to remember their need for wide-open spaces in which they can enjoy their freedom.

Scientists have recently discovered that fish kept in a tank are aware of what is going on in the room around them. When a person who has frightened or harmed them in some way, such as banging the tank, enters the room, they sense aggression and become frightened. When approached by a person who has shown them kindness, they become calm. Some even like being touched. Tropical fish taken from the wild are treated as nothing more than products to be sold for profit, without consideration for the vast, wild space they are normally free to explore, or the lives they were born to live.

Donkeys

Many people think of donkeys as stupid and stubborn, but they are actually some of the best problem solvers in the animal family. Donkeys originated in the African desert where the heat and terrain made it difficult to run quickly to escape danger. They learned to be very observant and to avoid danger.

What humans often misinterpret as stubborn or stupid is actually a donkey's way of being cautious. They stop long enough to analyze a situation and devise a plan. Humans often try pushing or beating a donkey to attempt to get them walking, but it is against a donkey's nature to walk into a situation that they think may be dangerous or that upsets them in some way.

A donkey's ability to think and respond appropriately has increased their usefulness to humans. In addition to carrying heavy loads, they are kept to guard sheep, goats, and cattle. When confronted by wolves, or domestic dogs, they will aggressively defend themselves and can attack or even kill predators by kicking and stomping.

Donkeys are often kept with horses, who are sometimes nervous and skittish, because of their calming influence. Donkey experts say they need the company of at least one other donkey to be truly happy. People who operate sanctuaries for animals say that what donkeys need is affection and play, and they enjoy the companionship of other species. Donkeys play with one another by chasing, hopping, and fake biting. When raised in a caring environment, they will also play with humans, especially children.

Sheep and Goats

Sheep and goats are smart and caring. Sheep can recognize the faces of at least 50 other sheep in photos and remember them for at least two years. They can also recognize the faces of humans they know in photos and remember them. Sheep are very choosy about their mates and, when given the opportunity, they take care of each other and other animals. Goats test fences to find their weaknesses, and if they can push them over or find some way to escape, they will do so. Goats leap for joy when they are happy, even making two full turns in the air.

True Account One

Bats are a tourist attraction. In summer, approximately 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats live under a certain bridge in Austin, Texas, in the U.S. They eat an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 kilos of insects each night, saving people who live or visit there from a lot of mosquito bites! About 100,000 tourists visit the bridge annually to watch the bats fly out of the roost every night at twilight.

True Account Two

Firemen were called to put out flames in an abandoned building. One of them saw a mother cat carrying her kittens out of the building, one by one. Her eyes were burned closed and her ears, fur, and paws were also severely burned. The firefighter watched as she touched each of her kittens with her nose to be sure they were all there and still alive. Then she collapsed, unconscious. The firefighter rushed the mother and kittens to a veterinarian. The mother and four of the kittens survived and all were adopted by caring people.

True Account Three

In a research study, chickens who were in pain were given the choice of food with or without added painkillers. Immediately, the chickens learned to choose the food with painkillers. When they had healed and were no longer in pain, they preferred food without painkillers.

True Account Four

A mother hen whose chicks were foraging in an open field sounded an alarm call when she spotted a hawk flying overhead. All the other hens ran for cover, but the chicks had not yet learned the alarm call and did not know they were supposed to run. Bravely, their mother raced into the open field, spread her wings over the chicks and made her body as low to the ground as possible. Mother hens will die protecting their chicks before seeking their own safety.

True Account Five

A parrot was named Alex by the scientist who taught him how to speak. Alex needed surgery, so the scientist dropped him off at the veterinarian's office. As she was leaving, Alex yelled to her "Come here! I love you! I am sorry! I want to go back!"

True Account Six

A 17 year old boy callously shot and killed a donkey as she was giving birth in a field. Her baby was taken to a veterinarian to be treated and was then adopted by a sanctuary for equines. The people who operated the sanctuary named the baby Burrito, Spanish for little donkey. They kept the donkey in their own home, cared for him 24 hours a day, and took turns sleeping next to him. The health and survival of baby donkeys depends on their being close to their mothers and feeling secure, just as is true for all mammals and many other animals. Against all odds, the baby survived.

True Account Seven

Sheep and goats like to be with their group. When they are allowed to do so, they groom one another and rub heads and cheeks. When they feel secure, they are much more adventurous. Scientists studying sheep removed one sheep at a time from a flock. The sheep who was removed became nervous, bleated loudly, and paced. Shown a photo of an unfamiliar sheep, the one taken away from his group did not relax. Only when shown a photo of a sheep from his own flock did he finally relax.

Activity One

Either ask students to work on their own, or ask the entire class to work together to find places in the stories where:

- A mother cares for her young.
- A being likes to have fun.
- A being is smarter than you thought.

- There is surprising information.

Ask students to discuss their findings in class.

Activity Two

In an area apart from where students sit, use chalk or easy-to-remove tape to draw a rectangle. It should be large enough so a student standing inside it could take three steps in any direction.

Ask several students, one at a time, to stand silently in this space for 15 minutes. No students may speak to the student in the rectangle during this time. Meanwhile, the class can continue whatever it was doing or discussing.

After several students have had an opportunity to stand in the marked space, ask them how the experience made them feel.

Explain to students that donkeys and other animals who are tied up or left in small stalls often spend the majority of their lives this way, without any interaction with others of their species. Often, their physical and emotional needs are not met.

Ask students if they have seen animals living this way. What did they feel when they saw this? Has their opinion changed since being part of the activity above?

A similar activity can be carried out for other species, like chickens or dolphins.

Turn a strong, plastic milk delivery crate upside down and ask students to take off their shoes and stand on it at the same time (as many as will fit on the crate). Allow them to stand this way, crowded together, for one or two minutes. During that time, the rest of the class can continue whatever activity or discussion they were engaged in.

Then allow the students on the crate to get down and ask them what the experience was like. Ask students which species spend their entire lives in cages, tanks, or aquariums. Ask students what they think it must feel like to live in captivity and have no choices.

Activity Three

For one week, ask students to keep track of every nonhuman animal they see, hear, or interact with in their community, either directly or indirectly, including the smallest and largest beings (insects, birds, lizards, and so on).

Direct interaction means coming face to face with the beings. Indirect interaction means any action that affects the beings, such as eating meat or milk, buying or wearing a product made from the skin of an animal, observing an animal simply living their life or an animal being used as entertainment, food, or clothing, an animal being treated with respect or being abused, and so on.

Ask students to keep notes on where they see these beings and what their impressions are of each being's quality of life.

Activity Four

Ask students to choose one of the stories above and put themselves in the place of the nonhuman animal in the story, or in the place of one of the beings they observed in their community (see Activities Two and Three). When describing what they feel, ask them to answer the following questions:

- Is this a being who likes to be warm or cold?
- Is this a being who usually lives in groups or on their own?
- What is this being's natural life like without any human intervention?
- What would it be like to spend every single day living in the same conditions as this being?

Ask them to list all the emotions they might feel if they were in the place of that being and why they might feel this way.

Activity Five

Discuss in class what people in your community can do to be more compassionate and caring toward the larger community that includes animals.

Resources

True Account 1:

"Mexican Free-tailed Bat." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 10 May 2011.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_Free-tailed_Bat
<http://tinyurl.com/5zzbz5>

True Account 2:

"Scarlett (cat)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 19 May 2011
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarlett_\(cat\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarlett_(cat))
<http://tinyurl.com/3jwrr7j>

True Accounts 3, 4, and 5:

Masson, Jeffrey Moussaieff and Susan McCarthy. *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*. New York: Dell, 1995.

True Account 6:

Roets, Lori. "Tiny miniature donkey orphaned when mom shot by teenager." *Charlotte Equine Examiner*. 11 May 2009.
<http://www.examiner.com/equine-in-charlotte/tiny-miniature-donkey-orphaned-when-mom-shot-by-teenager>
<http://tinyurl.com/3hhj5zn>

True Account 7:

Hatkoff, Amy. *The Inner World of Farm Animals: Their Amazing Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Capacities*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang – Abrams Books, 2009.