

Another factor that defines a community is the interaction among organisms. In a community, every organism's life is connected to every other organism's life in some way.

Some interactions are obvious. When a robin eats a worm, the robin is fed and the population of worms decreases by one. Other interactions are not as easily observed. The importance of an ash tree as a safe place for a robin to build a nest to raise young might be overlooked, but without the protection provided by the tree, the chances of the robin's increasing the population are reduced.

When the robin dies and its body falls to the forest floor, populations of decomposers, like bacteria and fungi, consume the remains, increasing their population and recycling the minerals from the robin's body back into the environment. The ash tree benefits from the mineral nutrients returned to the soil, increasing its vitality. A more vital ash tree is more likely to grow larger and produce seeds to reproduce new ash trees. The robin's mineral remains, processed by the decomposers, nourish the tree, which in turn provides more nesting sites for the next generations of robins.

This is just one peek into the complexity of a community. The interactions among the organisms together with the nonliving surroundings is called an **ecosystem**.

What organisms do you interact with in your community? Which ones do you eat, and which ones eat you? Which ones compete for your food, and which ones provide shelter or comfort?

