

What is a niche?

A niche describes the role or part an organism plays within its community and habitat. It includes:

- The environment***
- What it eats***
- Interactions with biotic elements (living things)***
- Interactions with abiotic elements (non-living things)***

A plant's or animal's niche, or more correctly, ecological niche, is a way of life that is unique to that species. Niche and habitat are not the same. While many species may share a habitat, this is not true of a niche. Each plant and animal species is a member of a community. The niche describes the species' role or function within this community. Not only does a niche include the environment a given organism lives in, it also includes the organism's "job" in that environment. A niche may also encompass what the organism eats, how it interacts with other living things or biotic factors, and also how it interacts with the non-living, or abiotic, parts of the environment as well.

For example, the red fox's habitat might include forest edges, meadows and the bank of a river. The niche of the red fox is that of a predator which feeds on the small mammals, amphibians, insects, and fruit found in this habitat. Red foxes are active at night. They provides blood for blackflies and mosquitoes, and are host to numerous diseases. The scraps, or carrion, left behind after a fox's meal provide food for many small scavengers and decomposers. This then is the ecological niche of the red fox. Only the red fox occupies this niche in the meadow-forest edge communities. In other plant communities different species of animal may occupy a similar niche to that of the red fox. For example, in the grassland communities of western Canada and the United States, the coyote occupies a similar niche (to that of the red fox.)

The ecological niche includes both the animal's or plant's physical habitat and how it has adapted to life in that habitat. In examining its adaptive strategy, ecologists consider how the plant or animal obtains its energy in order to live. Each organism has made many adaptations to its habitat. The first adaptation concerns where in the habitat the animal or plant has chosen to live.

Sources: http://evolution.abhttp://www.mikecurtis.org.uk/ecology/ecological_niche.htm

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