

Photo Description



This picture shows a big, old piece of wood on the ground that is falling apart and rotting. The wood has big holes in it, and you can see brown, crumbly parts where tiny creatures and plants are breaking it down. This special dead log is called a "nurse log" because it helps new plants and trees grow on top of it!

Scientific Phenomena

Anchoring Phenomenon: Decomposition and nutrient cycling in forest ecosystems

The log in this image is undergoing natural decomposition—a process where dead plant material breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces. Invisible decomposers (bacteria, fungi, and insects) are eating away at the wood, turning it back into soil-like material. This process releases nutrients stored in the wood back into the environment. A "nurse log" is particularly special because as it decays, it becomes a rich, nutrient-packed "bed" where seeds can sprout and young plants can grow. The dead tree literally becomes a parent ("nurse") to new life, demonstrating how death and life are connected in nature.

Core Science Concepts

- * Decomposition: The natural breakdown of dead things by tiny living organisms (decomposers like fungi and bacteria) that we cannot see without a microscope.
- * Nutrient Cycling: Dead materials get broken down and turned into nutrients (food and minerals) that help new plants grow.
- * Habitats and Homes: Dead wood provides shelter and food for insects, fungi, and other creatures, making it an important microhabitat.
- * Life Cycles: Living things are born, grow, reproduce, and eventually die—and their remains support new life.

Pedagogical Tip:

When introducing decomposition to First Graders, use sensory language and direct observation. Encourage students to touch (safely) or observe decaying leaves and wood in your outdoor classroom. Avoid the word "rotting" if it seems gross to students; instead, use "breaking down" or "becoming soil." Students this age think concretely, so the idea that "the tree is feeding new plants" is more meaningful than abstract nutrient cycling.

UDL Suggestions:

To support diverse learners, provide multiple means of engagement: allow kinesthetic learners to touch real decaying wood samples (with gloves), visual learners to observe the image closely, and verbal learners to describe what they see aloud. Use real, tactile materials from your school yard rather than only showing pictures. For students who need extra support, pre-teach vocabulary with photos and simple diagrams. For advanced learners, introduce the word "decomposer" and ask them to predict what tiny creatures might live in the log.

Zoom In / Zoom Out

Zoom In: Microscopic Level

If we could shrink down and look inside the wood with a super-powerful microscope, we would see millions of tiny bacteria and fungi (too small to see with just our eyes) working like little construction crews, breaking apart the wood fibers into teeny-tiny pieces. These decomposers are actually eating the dead wood and producing nutrients like nitrogen that plants need to grow.

Zoom Out: Ecosystem Level

This single nurse log is part of a larger forest ecosystem. As the log breaks down over many years, it nourishes the whole forest floor. The nutrients released feed seedlings, shrubs, and herbs. The decaying log also feeds insects, which feed birds and small mammals. A dead log in the forest is not "gone"—it is being recycled back into the community of life, keeping the whole forest healthy and connected.

Discussion Questions

- * "What do you think happens inside this old log?" (Bloom's: Understand | DOK: 1)
- * "Why might a baby plant like to grow on this dead log instead of on the hard ground?" (Bloom's: Analyze | DOK: 2)
- * "If we came back to look at this log in two years, what changes do you think we might see?" (Bloom's: Predict/Analyze | DOK: 2)
- * "How is this dead log like a helper or nurse for baby plants? What does the nurse log give to the baby plants?" (Bloom's: Evaluate/Apply | DOK: 3)

Potential Student Misconceptions

- * Misconception: "Dead wood is just trash and nothing is using it."
- Clarification: Dead wood is actually very busy! Tiny creatures (too small to see) are living in it and breaking it down. Plants grow on it, insects live in it, and it feeds the whole forest. It's like a fancy apartment building for forest creatures!
- * Misconception: "Once a tree dies, it's gone forever."
- Clarification: When a tree dies, it doesn't disappear. It slowly breaks down and becomes part of the soil and food for new trees and plants. The tree transforms into something new!
- * Misconception: "Only big animals live in or on the log."
- Clarification: Most of the creatures living in the log are so tiny we cannot see them without a microscope, but they are the most important workers! Beetles, millipedes, and other bugs also live there, but the tiniest decomposers do most of the work.

Extension Activities

Observation Journal: Take students outside to find a fallen log or piece of wood in your schoolyard. Have them draw what they see on the outside and predict what might be living inside*. Return to observe the same log over several weeks and record changes in drawings.

* Decomposition in a Jar: Create a small "decomposition experiment" by layering leaves, small twigs, and soil in a clear plastic jar. Add water and keep it in a cool place. Have students observe and draw changes weekly. (This mimics what happens in a nurse log on a smaller scale.)

* Creature Hunt: With gloves and supervision, carefully lift pieces of decaying wood or bark and observe the insects and creatures living underneath (millipedes, beetles, ants, worms). Return creatures gently to their home. Create a class list of "nurse log residents."

Cross-Curricular Ideas

* Math: Measure the length and width of the nurse log using non-standard units (like hand-spans or blocks). Graph the types of plants or insects found on multiple logs in your schoolyard.

ELA/Writing: Read *The Tree** by Marc Martin or similar literature about trees. Have students write or dictate a story about a baby tree that grows on a nurse log: "My Life on a Nurse Log."

* Social Studies: Discuss how forests provide homes for many creatures and how we can protect forests. Make a class "Thank You" poster for trees and decomposers.

* Art: Create a mixed-media collage using real leaves, bark, and twigs to represent a nurse log and the creatures living there. Paint or color the decomposer creatures and new plants growing on top.

STEM Career Connection

Forest Scientist / Ecologist: A forest scientist studies how trees, animals, soil, and dead logs all work together in nature. They help keep forests healthy by understanding how decomposition and nutrient cycling work. Some forest scientists even manage woodlands to protect them. Average salary: \$65,000–\$75,000 USD per year.*

Soil Scientist: A soil scientist studies what's in soil—including nutrients made from decomposed plants and animals—to help plants grow better on farms and in forests. They sometimes dig and examine dead logs to understand how soil gets its "food." Average salary: \$68,000–\$78,000 USD per year.*

Park Ranger / Naturalist: A park ranger takes care of forests and parks, including teaching visitors about decomposition, nurse logs, and forest habitats. They lead nature walks and help protect the forest ecosystem. Average salary: \$40,000–\$55,000 USD per year.*

NGSS Connections

Performance Expectation: 1-LS1-1. Use materials to design a solution to a human problem by mimicking how plants and/or animals use their external parts to help them survive, grow, and meet their needs.

Disciplinary Core Ideas:

- 1-LS1.A Structure and Function—Students should understand that plants need water, light, and nutrients from soil to grow. This nurse log provides all three!
- 1-LS1.B Growth and Development of Organisms—Dead material is recycled into nutrients for new organisms to use.

Crosscutting Concepts:

- Patterns Decomposition follows a predictable pattern over time.
- Cycles Matter cycles between living and non-living parts of ecosystems (the water cycle, nutrient cycle).
- Energy and Matter Energy flows through decomposers; matter is conserved as organisms break down.

Science Vocabulary

* Decompose (or break down): When dead things are slowly turned into smaller pieces by tiny creatures and nature.

- * Decomposer: A living thing (usually too tiny to see) that eats dead plants and animals and breaks them into nutrients.
- * Nutrient: Food and minerals that plants need to grow, like what's in soil or water.
- * Habitat: A home where plants and animals live and find food, water, and shelter.
- * Nurse Log: A dead, fallen log that provides nutrients and a safe place for new plants and creatures to live and grow.

External Resources

Children's Books:

*The Tree** by Marc Martin—A beautifully illustrated book showing a tree's life cycle from seed to big tree to dead wood, and how it becomes home for other creatures.

*From Seed to Plant** by Gail Gibbons—A clear, simple picture book showing how plants grow, with connections to where they get nutrients from soil.

*Decomposition** by Robin Bernard—A simple, colorful book explaining what happens when plants and animals die and break down (uses kid-friendly language and illustrations).