CRITTER SEARCH

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Grade Level: K-12
Alaska State Content Standards: SA14, SA15
Subject: Science
Skills: Classification, Observation
Duration: 1 class period
Group Size: 2
Setting: outdoors
Vocabulary: edge

OBJECTIVE
Students will identify what animals have frequented a local ecosystem and how they have used the environment.

TEACHING STRATEGY
Students will explore a local ecosystem to observe the evidence of animal activity.

MATERIALS
- Animal track field guides
- Hand lens
- Critter Search Treasure Hunt worksheet

TEACHER BACKGROUND
By observing the evidence left by animals in an area, more can be learned about the ecosystem as a whole. Animal tracks can be a relatively easy indicator of animals living in a specific habitat. Other signs are scat or pellets, plant shoots nipped cleanly by hares or torn and crushed by moose, bark stripped from spruce by porcupines, or bark nibbled from willows by moose. All of these indicators are easily observed by students of all ages.

PROCEDURE
1. Locate an area where students can find animal tracks, scat or pellets, and/or evidence of browsing.
2. Divide the class into teams of 2. Explain that students will be working together to locate evidence that animals have been in the area. Discuss what these signs may look like and how to use the animal track field guides.
3. Have students follow the Critter Search Treasure Hunt worksheet to locate different animal clues.

4. Students then compare their findings, sharing them with the class. Ask the following questions:

   a. What was the most interesting thing you found?

   b. How many different types (species) of animals live here?

   c. How many animals total do you think live here?

   d. What were the easiest things to find? What were the hardest?

   e. Do you think your findings would be different at a different time of year? If so, why?

   f. How do you think studying animal signs may help wildlife biologists?

EVALUATION
Ask the students to write a detailed answer to the following:
If you were an animal living here, who would you be and why? (Make sure students include something about the food, water, and shelter resources in the area).

EXTENSION
To extend the activity, choose an ecosystem **edge** as a location for study. An edge is an area where two (2) or more different habitats meet such as the border of a meadow and forest. Edges are usually more diverse than other areas as they provide a larger variety of food and shelter for the local animals. After studying an edge and a non-edge ecosystem, students can compare the two.