

ACTIVITY: A whopper of a story helps kids understand how a sea turtle might confuse plastic bags with jelly.



GRADE LEVEL(S): K to 6th



20 minutes

DISCIPLINES: Science, conservation

OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to:

- discuss how an animal can confuse trash with their food
- recognize the importance of reducing, reusing, and recycling

- MATERIALS:
- Small acrylic aquarium (approximately 1.5 gallon) or clear acrylic container
 - Water
 - Plastic bag (pre-cut into to look like jelly)
 - Small rock (1-1/2 inch diameter)
 - Aquarium plants, rocks, and/or decorations

Background: Leatherback sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) search for jellyfish in the deep sea throughout the world including the Gulf of Mexico. Leatherbacks are the largest kind of turtle, reaching lengths up to 6.5 feet (2 m) and weights up to 2,000 pounds (900 kg). Unfortunately, to a hungry sea turtle, a plastic bag floating in the water might look like jelly. When a sea turtle eats a plastic bag, the bag does not digest. It tricks the turtle's body into thinking it's full. Then the sea turtles will not hunt or eat enough and can become weak, even slowly die of malnutrition or starvation.



Photo courtesy NOAA

Background information:

Leatherback Sea Turtles, NOAA:

www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/leatherback.htm

"Leatherback Turtle Threatened By Plastic Garbage In Ocean" Science Daily:

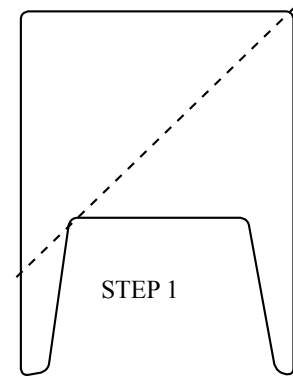
www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/03/090315224258.htm

WHAT TO DO:

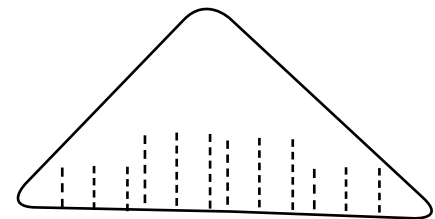
Preparation

Turn the plastic bag into a jelly.

Step 1: Cut-off the bottom corner of the plastic bag to make the jelly. Be sure no letters, art, or logo are part of the jelly. Save the unused portion of the bag to stuff the jelly in STEP 3.



Step 2: Make tentacles by cutting the bottom of the jelly into strips. Also, cut some fringe onto either end of the cut handle.



Step 3: To give the jelly some shape, stuff the extra plastic into the corner of the jelly. Because it floats so well, add a small rock or two to help it slightly sink. Tie the cut-off bag handle around the jelly.

Step 4: Decorate the aquarium with the rocks and plants. Fill with water.

Step 5: Place the jelly inside. Swish it around until it looks jelly-like. Play with the aquarium layout and where the kids will sit to help create the illusion that it's a real animal. (Suggestions: You may want to cover the aquarium so kids can't see it until you're ready.)



Example of "jelly" in water.

Activity

Step 1: Introduce some sea turtle facts. If younger students, have them role-play a swimming and eating turtle.

- Most sea turtles eat jellies.
- Sea turtles swim through the sea in search of jellies to eat.
- Sea turtles do not chew their food. They quickly grab it and swallow it whole.

Step 2: Tell the kids that sea turtles often mistake plastic bags floating in the sea for the jellies they hunt. To get students to think about this, you might ask:

- *Do you think it'd be healthy to eat a bag?*
- *Does an animal use, know about, or understand plastic?*
- *What do you think happens if an animal eats a bag? (The stomach sends a signal to brain that the turtle is full or not hungry.)*
- *What if a person doesn't eat for a long time, what happens? (Starve, not get vitamins and minerals you need, get weak)*
- *What might happen to a sea turtle if it doesn't eat? (Explain that it can make the turtle very sick.)*

Sum up the discussion with something like, "So a sea turtle eats a plastic bag because it expects it to be a jelly."

Ask (sort of incredulously): *Can you imagine thinking a plastic bag is a jelly? Hard to believe isn't it?*

Step 3: Sell the Tale: In a hushed, but enthusiastic voice, tell kids that you have something exciting to share with them – a jellyfish you were able to bring into the classroom. However, they have to keep their distance, and be very still and quiet so it does not become scared. Show them the jelly. Have kids role-play how a jelly moves through the sea. Maybe share a fact or two about jellies (no eyes, no bones, mostly water...)

Step 4: The big reveal. Say, *Oh, and one more thing...* Then reach into the aquarium and pull out the bag. (Allow kids time to realize and react to discovering that it is a plastic bag and not a jelly.) Then add, Maybe it's not so hard to confuse a plastic bag with a jelly!

Step 5: Let the kids share their thoughts about discovering it was a plastic bag when they expected it to be a jelly.

NOTE: This is a basic skeleton of how to tell the tale. Make it your own by add cool facts and tell the tale in your own way.