

Urchin, Otter, Kelp

Age: 4+

Sea otters – they’re cute, they’re cuddly, they’re kind of like the teddy bears of the ocean. Who wouldn’t want to make sure that these animals are around? But to keep these animals around, we need to consider all of the animals in they’re underwater ecosystem.



Every organism in the wild lives in an ecosystem. They rely on other things for food, protection, habitat. Take sea otters – they live on the west coast of North America, and something they seem to love is spiky sea urchins. The urchins have a huge appetite too. They have 5 teeth that are self-sharpening, and they munch along at the kelp forest.

Kelp is at the bottom of the food chain, but has a really big job to do. Kelp forests are stunning places, with chains of kelp that run from the sea floor right up to the surface. They can be as high as 10 stories. Fish hide from predators in the kelp, and other organisms (not just sea urchins) eat the blades of this massive algae. And, it is actually really important to people, acting as a barrier to protect the coastline from waves and winds, and it also acts to suck up pollution along the way.

The otters, the urchin, the kelp – they exist in a perfectly balanced circle of beings. Now, what happens when you take an organism out of the ecosystem? In the 1800’s, the otters were removed when they were hunted nearly to extinction during the fur trade. With no otters around to keep the sea urchins in check, these invertebrates went to town gobbling up the kelp forest. Pretty soon, the urchins had no kelp to feed on, and the fish that hid in the kelp were all eaten by predators. The ecosystem collapsed into a barren seafloor full of hungry urchins.

If you put the sea otter back in the game, we have a beautiful feedback loop. The otter relies on the urchins, the urchins rely on the kelp, and the kelp is kept safe by the otters.

So, if you say you want to save the otter, what you are actually saying is that you want to save the entire ecosystem and the animals that live in it. You want to save the otter, you want to save the kelp, and you want to save the sea urchin!

In the game below, you will experience first hand how interconnected the urchin, otter and kelp feedback loop is. The game is based off the original camp game “Giants, Wizards, and Elves (<https://www.icebreakers.ws/medium-group/giants-wizards-elves.html>).

How to Play

Urchin, Otter, Kelp is an icebreaker that is similar to Rock, Paper, Scissors. This game requires no materials and can be played indoors or outdoors, and works best with groups of 5 or more (up to an endless amount!).

This game involves two teams who will act as one of 3 characters: urchin, otter and kelp. When a player acts out a character, they do the specific hand motions associated with the character.

- **Kelp.** Stand on your tippy toes, raise your arms in the air, and sway back and forth like a stalk of kelp floating in the current.
- **Urchin.** Crouch slightly, as urchins are pretty small. Point your fingers, and poke out to all sides to imitate an urchin's spiky spines!
- **Otter.** Lean back and rub your hands on your belly to imitate a sea otter that is storing food on its belly.

Make sure everyone knows the motions and sounds. Feel free to practice until everyone knows how to become each character. Split everyone into two teams and divide them into separate sides of the room. For each round, both teams huddle and choose to become an urchin, otter or kelp. When ready, both teams then line up and stand facing each other, about five or six feet apart. At the start of each round, the leader says "Three, two, one, go!!"

At this point, each team acts out the character they chose. As soon as they do this, the winner tries to grab the loser — as many people over to their side as they can. The loser tries to retreat back to their own side to be safe for that round. If captured, a person now belongs to the other team. The following determines who beats who:

Otters beat urchins, as otters eat urchins. Urchins beat kelp, as they munch on their blades. Kelp beats otters, as kelp is essential to maintaining a balanced ecosystem and habitat for the otters. If both teams show the same character, no one wins. Rounds keep repeating until one team wins (the other team is completely captured).

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