

Natural selection

Natural selection is a process by which certain *traits* (characteristics) become more common over time. Each living thing is born with different traits. These traits can be passed on to offspring. Certain traits make it more likely that an individual will survive and have offspring. Individuals without these traits are less likely to survive and have offspring. Over time, the traits that give an advantage become more common among members of a *species*. A species is one particular kind of living thing. Natural selection is sometimes described as *survival of the fittest*.

Natural selection is an important part of the *theory of evolution*. The theory of evolution describes how living things change over many generations.

Consider the example of giraffes. Giraffes compete to eat the leaves of trees. Some giraffes might have longer necks than others. Giraffes with longer necks can reach more leaves. So long-necked giraffes can get more food. As a result, they are more likely to survive and reproduce. More of the long-necked giraffe young will survive and eventually reproduce themselves. Over time, more and more giraffes will have long necks. In this way, natural selection can lead to the evolution of giraffes with long necks.

If a living thing's surroundings change, different traits may become favorable to survival. The overall character of a species might then change. In this way, the species *adapts*, or changes to fit its surroundings. Consider a single species that lives in different environments. Natural selection may favor different traits depending on where an individual lives. Eventually, individuals may differ so much that they become separate species.

The theory of natural selection was first described in the mid-1800's by the British scientist Charles Darwin. It was the centerpiece of his theory of evolution. Nearly all scientists accept the ideas of natural selection and evolution. But some people feel that these ideas conflict with their religious beliefs.

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