

Let us look at some interesting aspects about earth's biodiversity based on the currently available species inventories. More than 70 per cent of all the species recorded are animals, while plants (including algae, fungi, bryophytes, gymnosperms and angiosperms) comprise no more than 22 per cent of the total. Among animals, insects are the most species-rich taxonomic group, making up more than 70 per cent of the total. That means, out of every 10 animals on this planet, 7 are insects. Again, how do we explain this enormous diversification of insects? The number of fungi species in the world is more than the combined total of the species of fishes, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. In Figure 15.1, biodiversity is depicted showing species number of major taxa.

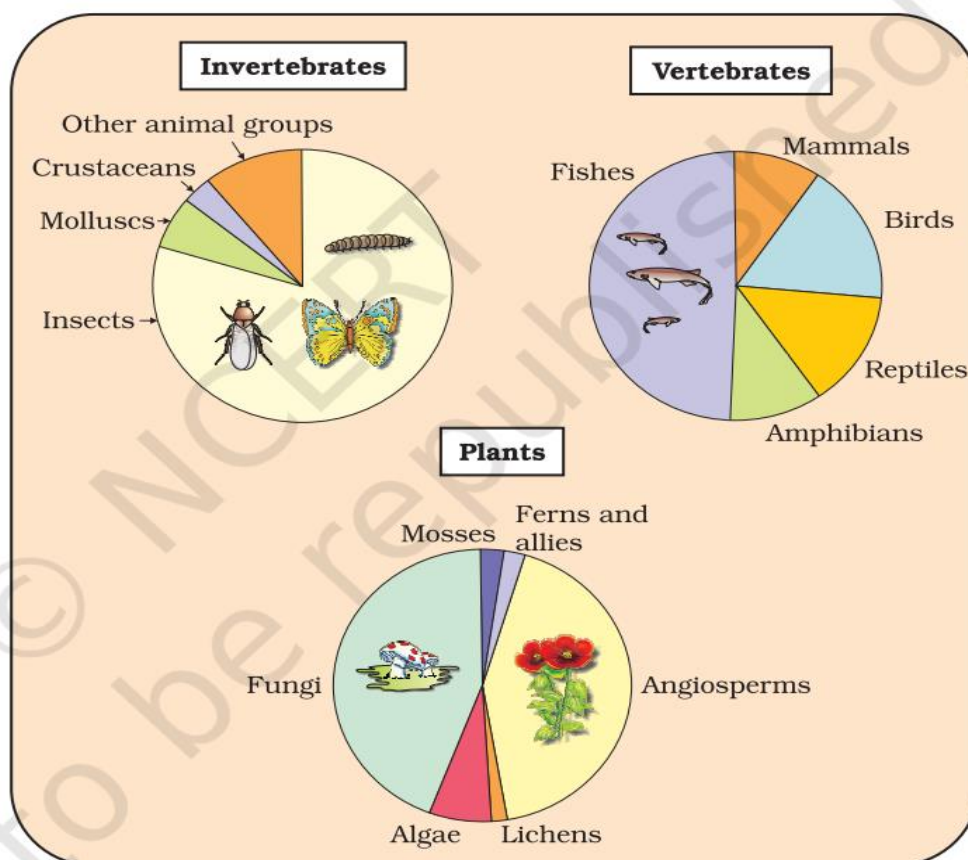


Figure 15.1 Representing global biodiversity: proportionate number of species of major taxa of plants, invertebrates and vertebrates

It should be noted that these estimates do not give any figures for prokaryotes. Biologists are not sure about how many prokaryotic species there might be. The problem is that conventional taxonomic methods are not suitable for identifying microbial species and many species are simply not culturable under laboratory conditions. If we accept biochemical or molecular criteria for delineating species for this group, then their diversity alone might run into millions.