

MODULE 4

BIODIVERSITY AND WILDFIRE



CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT



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The fourth module focuses on the relationship between biodiversity and wildfires. It explores how wildfires impact various species and ecosystems, sometimes threatening biodiversity but also playing a natural role in ecosystem regeneration.



The module also covers how biodiversity can influence the resilience of ecosystems to wildfires and the importance of preserving diverse habitats to mitigate fire-related risks.



CONTENT

Throughout this module, you will learn about:

1. Biodiversity in forests

2. Global biodiversity conservation

3. Importance of Global Biodiversity Conservation

4. Examples of Protected Species in European Forests



CONTENT

5.Role of biodiversity in maintaining ecosystem resilience to fire

6.Species promote fire and cause effect on forest ecosystem

7.Species adaptations to fire

8.Strategies for conserving and enhancing forest biodiversity in fire-prone areas



BIODIVERSITY IN FORESTS



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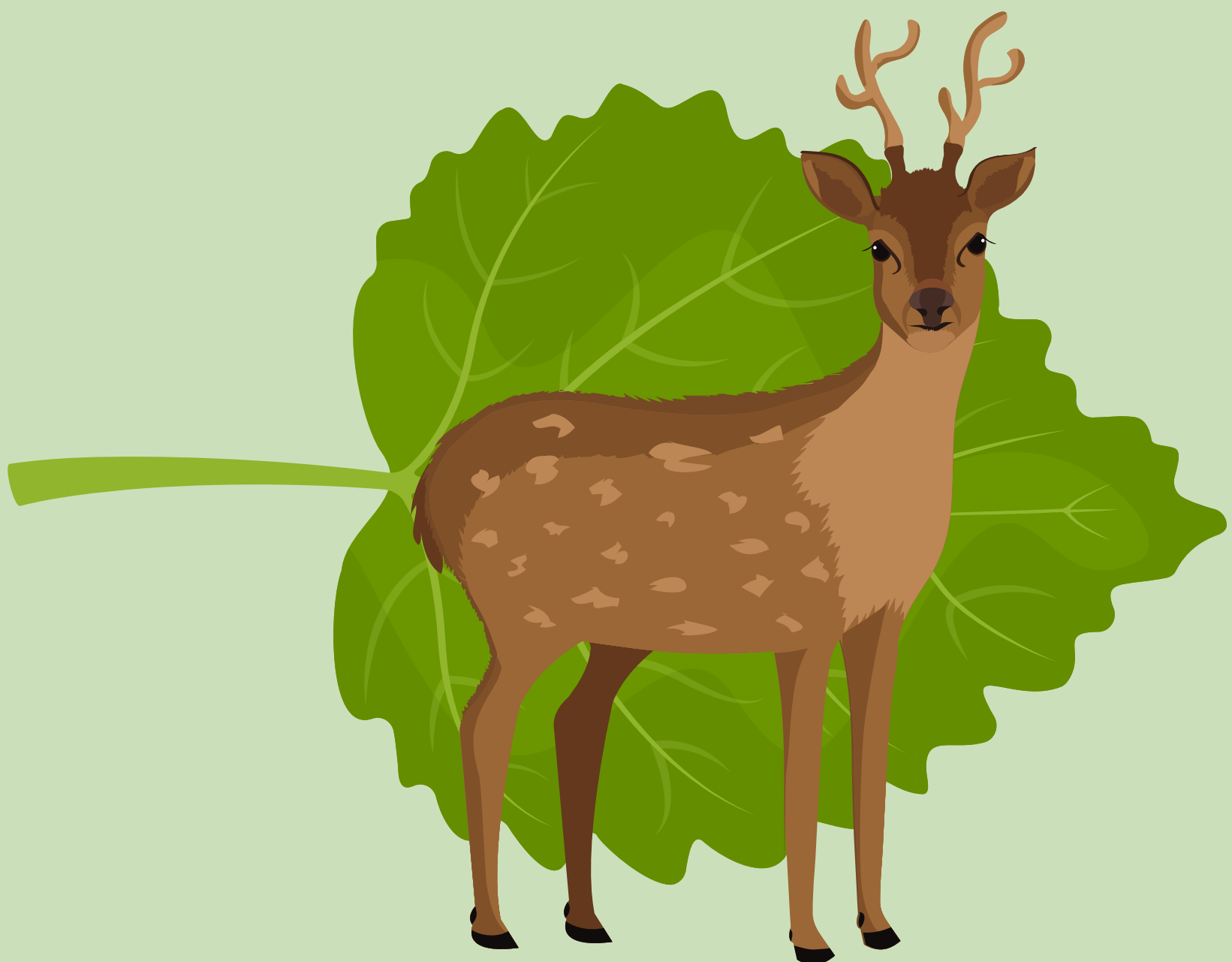
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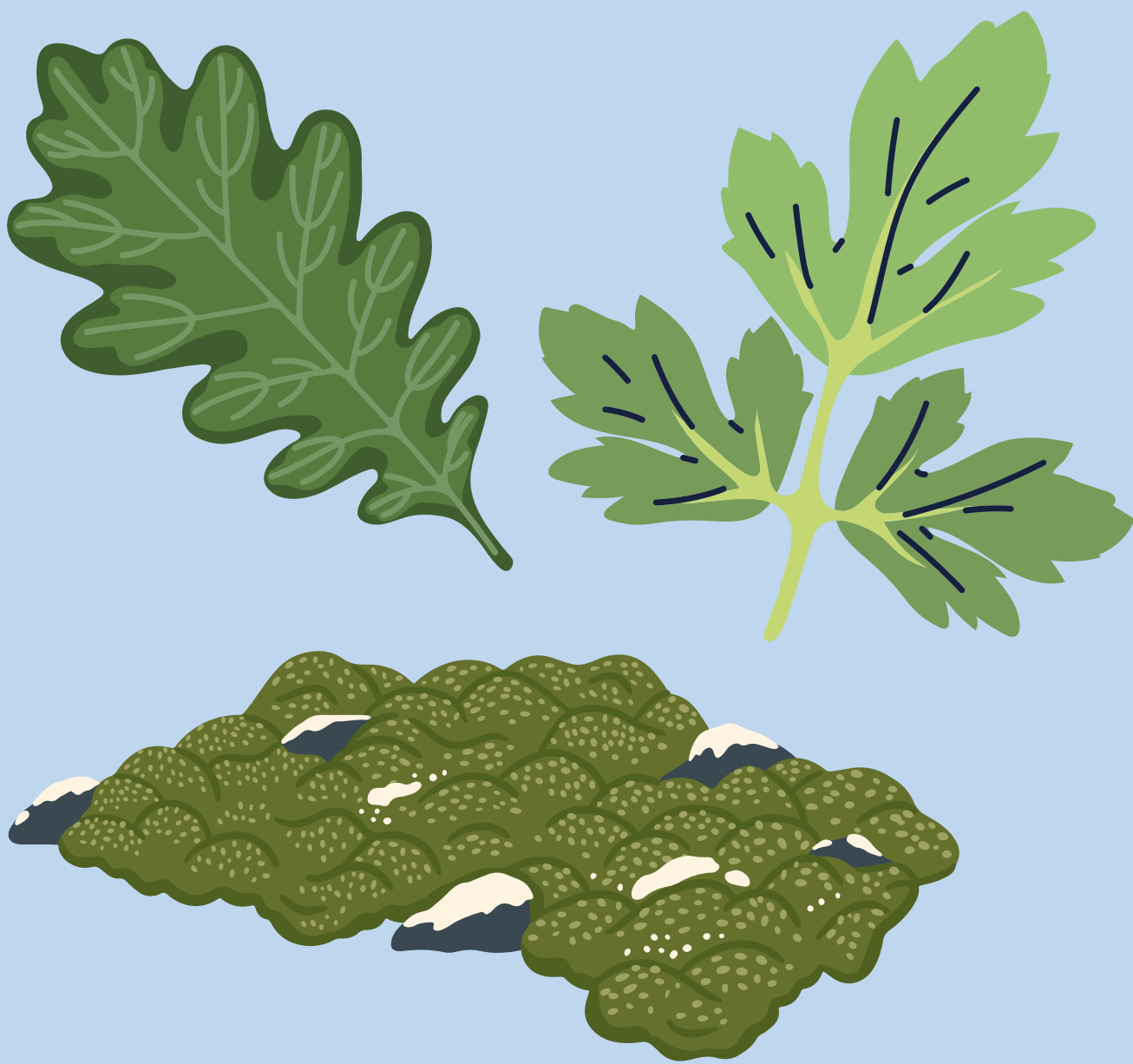
Biodiversity in forests refers to the vast variety of life forms that inhabit them, encompassing different species of plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms.

This diversity includes everything from towering trees and predatory birds to tiny insects and microscopic bacteria living in the soil. Each organism plays a specific role within the forest ecosystem, contributing to its complexity, stability, and resilience. Here's a breakdown of what this means:



VARIETY OF PLANTS

Forests are home to a wide range of plant species, including trees, shrubs, herbs, and mosses. These plants form various layers in the forest, from the high canopy to the forest floor, creating diverse habitats for other organisms.



ANIMAL INHABITANTS

A multitude of animal species, including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects, rely on forests for shelter, food, and breeding grounds. The complex interplay between these animals and their environment helps in pollination, seed dispersal, and controlling pest populations.



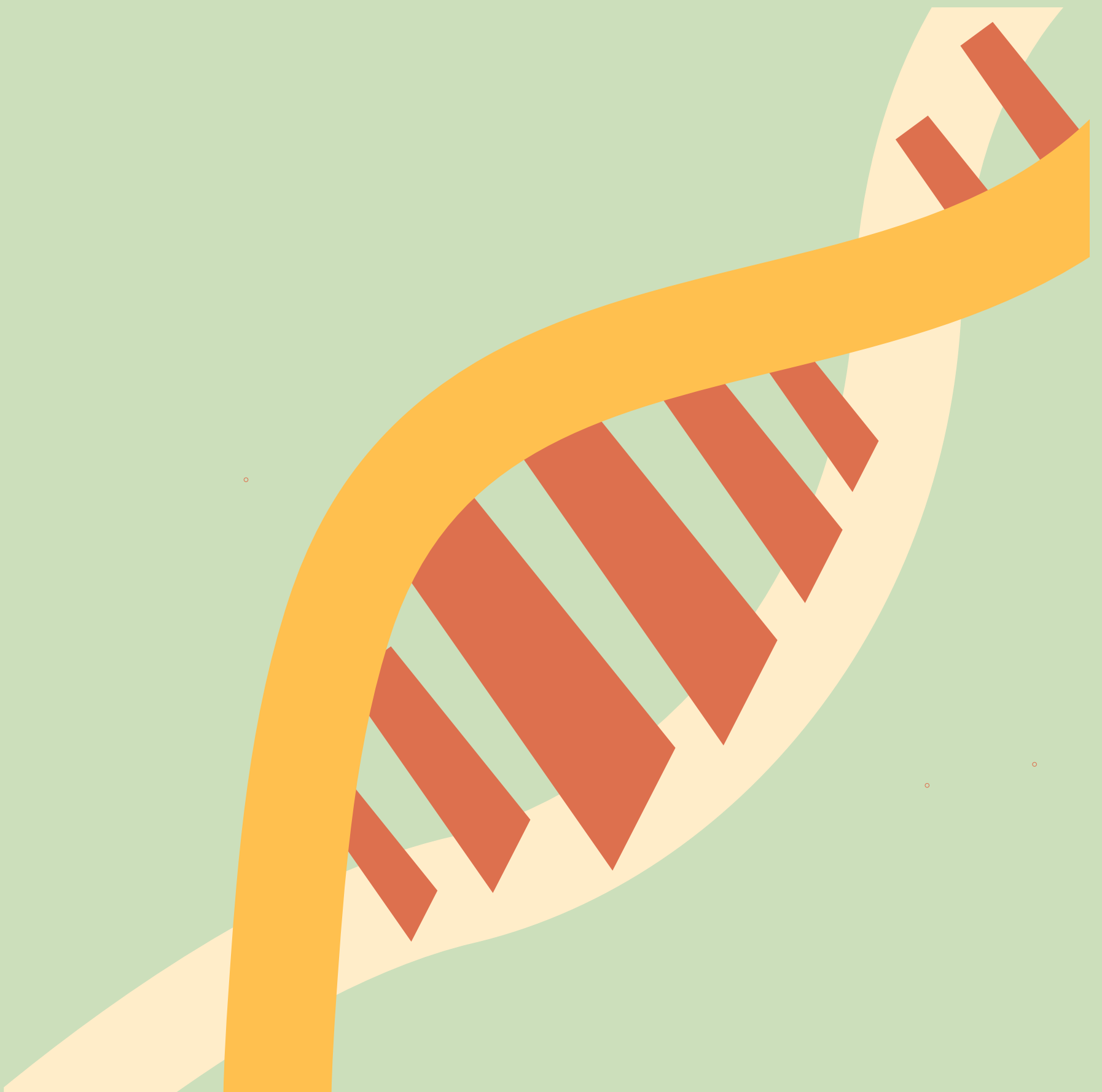
FUNGI AND MICROORGANISMS

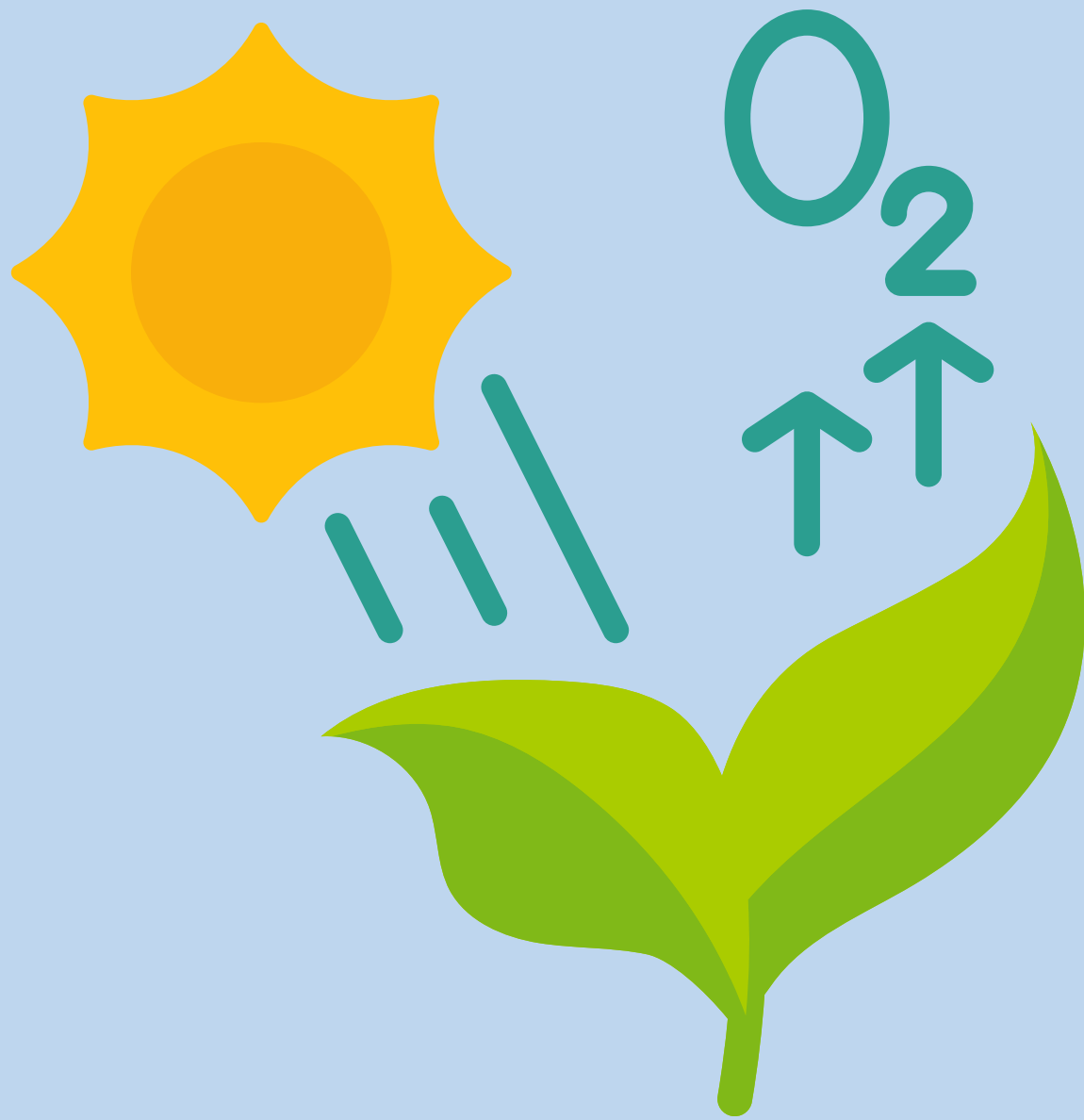
Often overlooked, fungi and microorganisms play critical roles in forest ecosystems. They break down dead material, recycling nutrients back into the soil, which supports plant growth. They also form symbiotic relationships with plants, such as mycorrhizal associations, enhancing water and nutrient uptake.



GENETIC DIVERSITY

Within each species, there's a range of genetic variation that enables populations to adapt to changing conditions, resist diseases, and maintain the ecosystem's health and productivity.



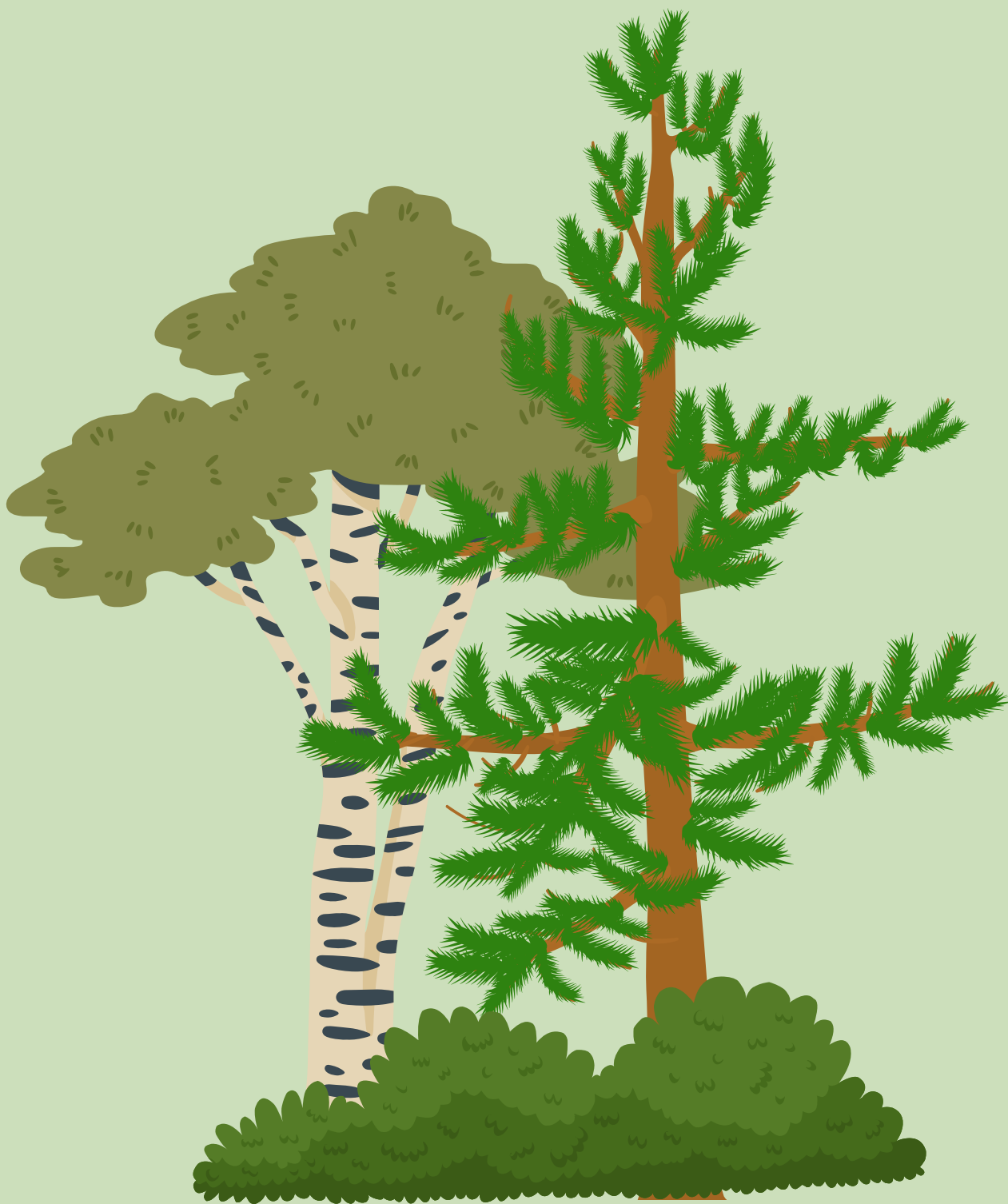


ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Forest biodiversity is not just about the species it contains but also about the benefits it provides, including oxygen production, carbon sequestration (capturing and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide), water regulation, soil preservation, and climate regulation. These services are essential for the survival and well-being of human societies.

RESILIENCE AND STABILITY

High biodiversity increases a forest's resilience to disturbances like fires, storms, and diseases. Diverse ecosystems are better equipped to recover from shocks and maintain ecological functions and services.



GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION



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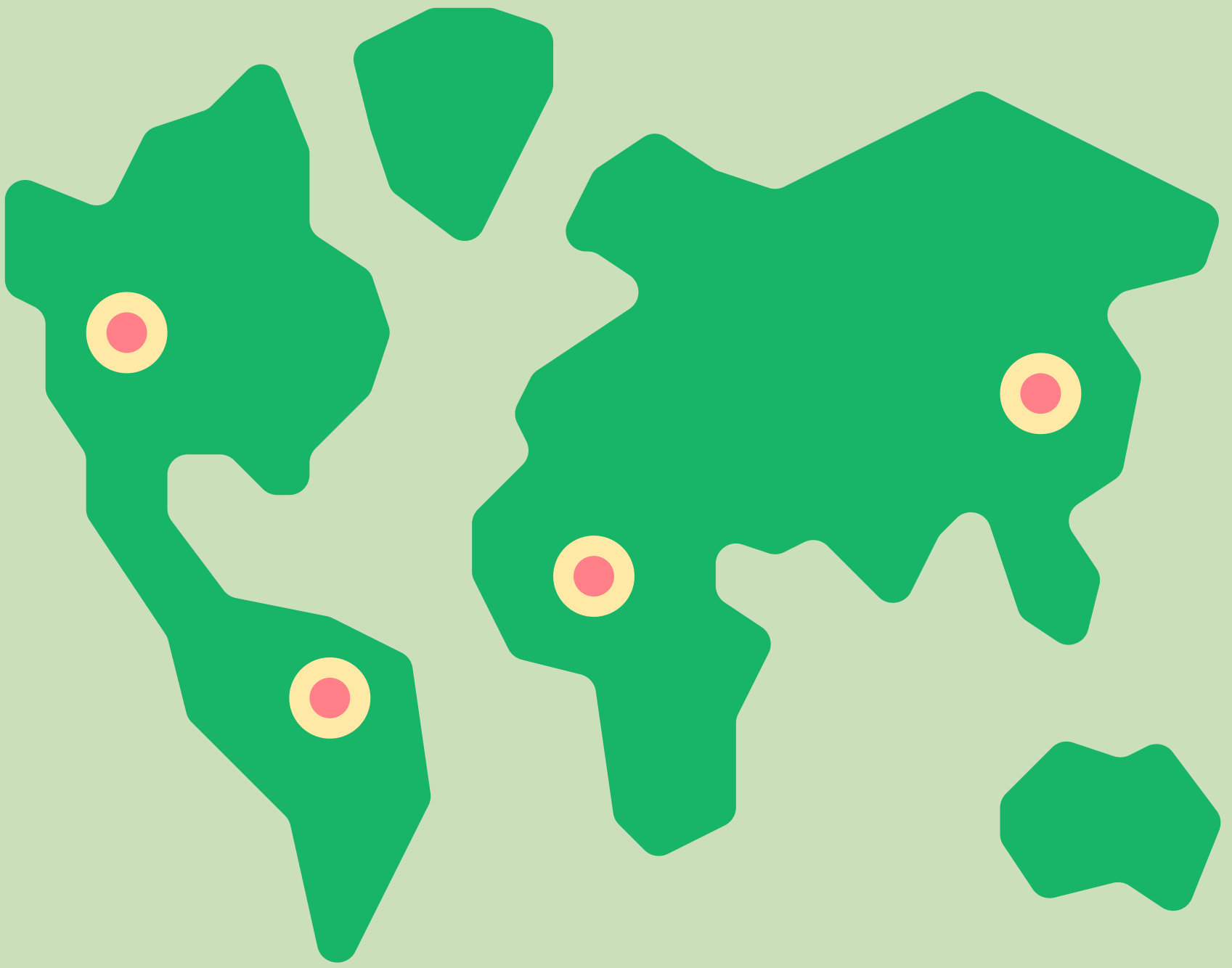


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Global biodiversity conservation is crucial for maintaining the health and stability of ecosystems worldwide. It involves protecting the variety of life in all its forms, including species that are unique to specific areas (endemism) and those at risk of extinction (threatened species).



ENDEMISM: UNIQUE TREASURES OF NATURE

Endemic species are plants and animals found in a specific geographical area and nowhere else on Earth.

They are like nature's exclusive artwork, offering unique genetic resources, contributing to local ecosystems' health, and providing cultural significance. The Scottish Crossbill is a bird species endemic to the Caledonian Forest in Scotland.

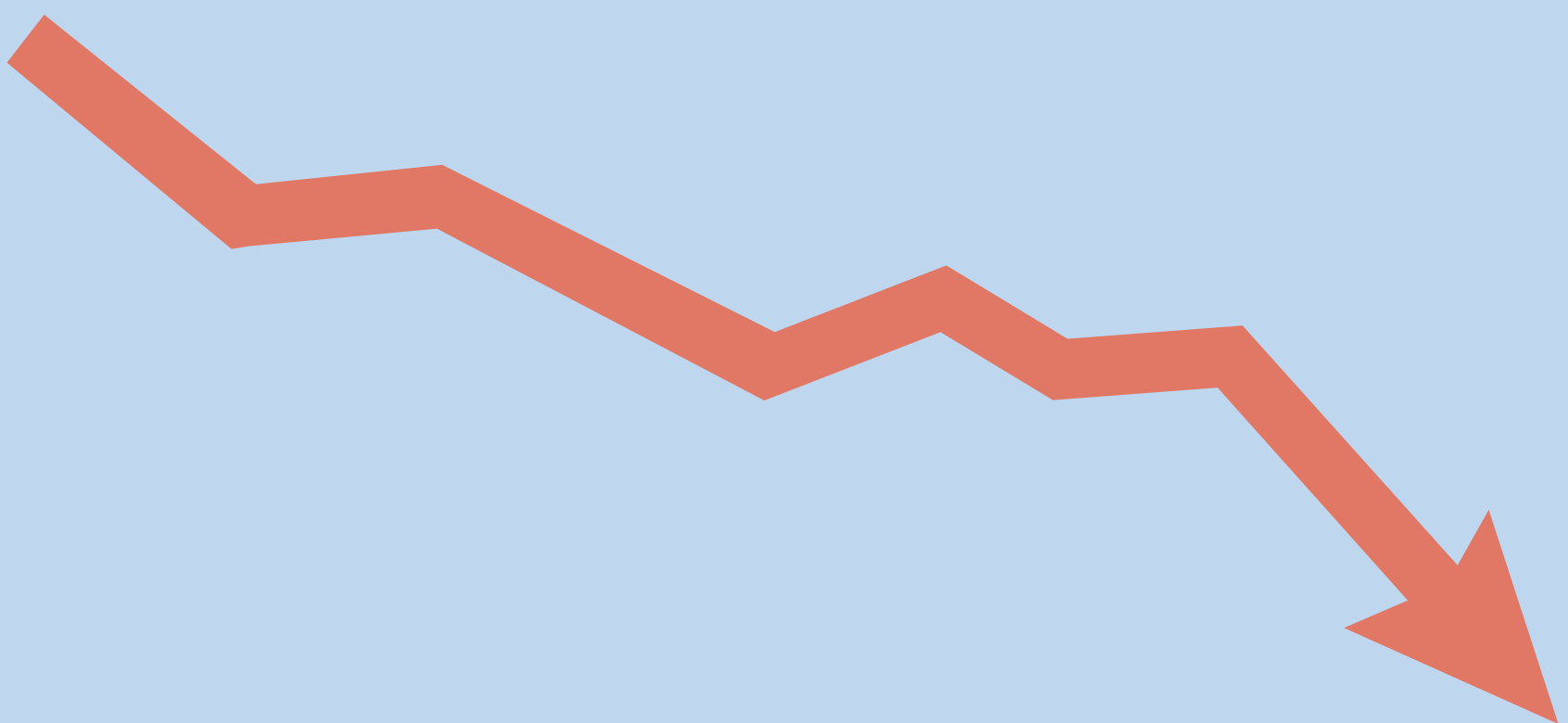


It's the only bird species unique to the UK, adapted specifically to feeding on the seeds of native conifers. Conserving the Caledonian Forest not only protects this unique species but also supports a rich ecosystem that has evolved with it.



THREATENED SPECIES

Threatened species are those at risk of extinction due to factors like habitat loss, climate change, pollution, and overexploitation. These species act as indicators of the health of an ecosystem.



Protecting them helps to maintain biodiversity, which is essential for ecosystem resilience and human well-being.

The Iberian Lynx, once found throughout Spain, Portugal, and France, is now one of the world's most endangered wild cats.





Conservation efforts in the Iberian Peninsula, focusing on habitat restoration and the reintroduction of individuals to their native habitats, have started to increase their numbers, showcasing the impact of targeted conservation efforts.

IMPORTANCE OF GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

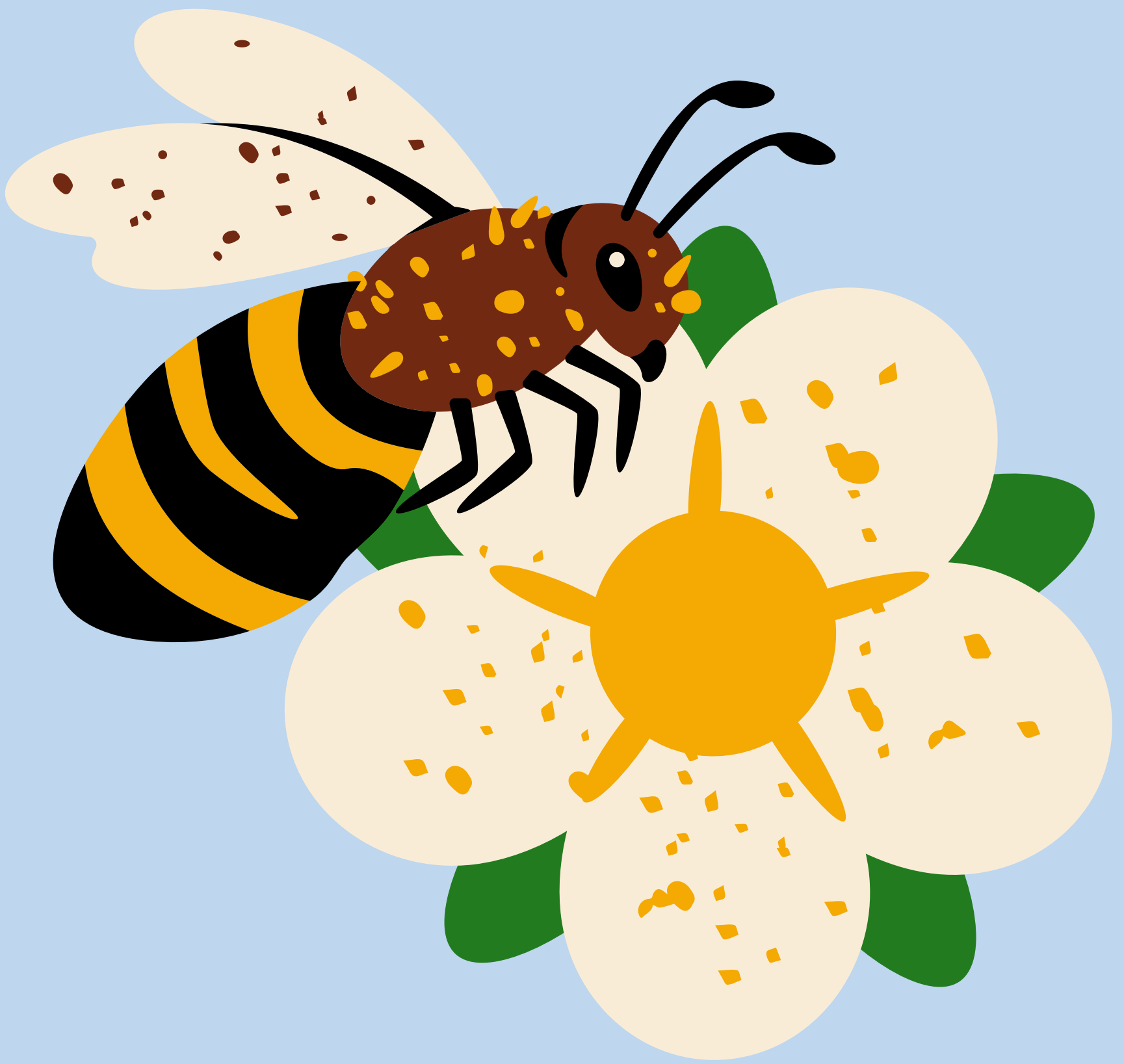


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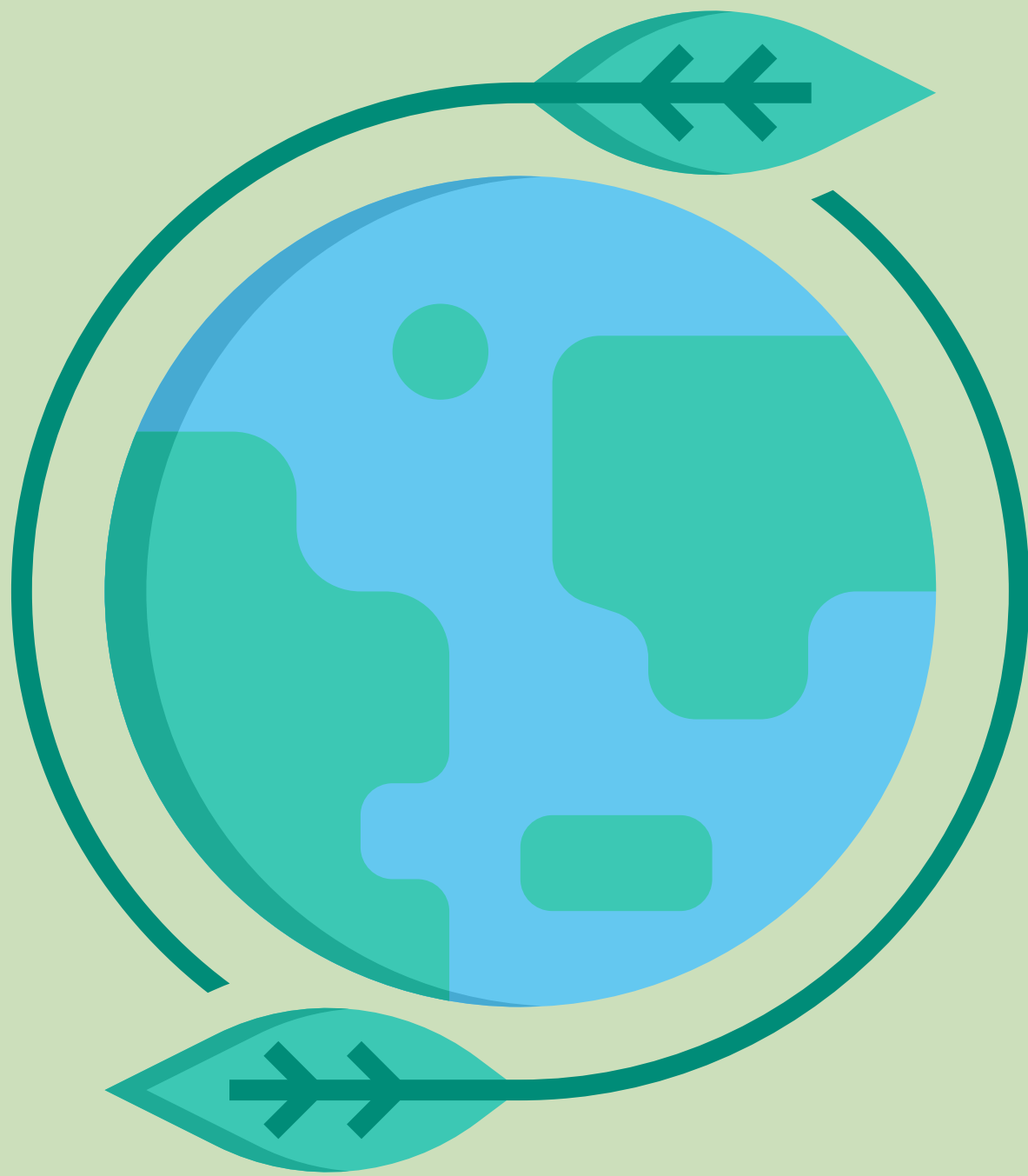


ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Biodiversity supports vital ecosystem services like water purification, pollination of crops, and carbon sequestration, which are essential for human survival.

Resilience to Environmental Changes

Diverse ecosystems are more resilient to changes and stresses, such as climate change. This resilience is crucial for maintaining ecological balance and supporting human livelihoods.



Scientific and Medical Research

Biodiversity is a source of immense natural knowledge and resources. Many medicines are derived from plants and animals, and understanding genetic diversity can lead to breakthroughs in healthcare, agriculture, and environmental management.



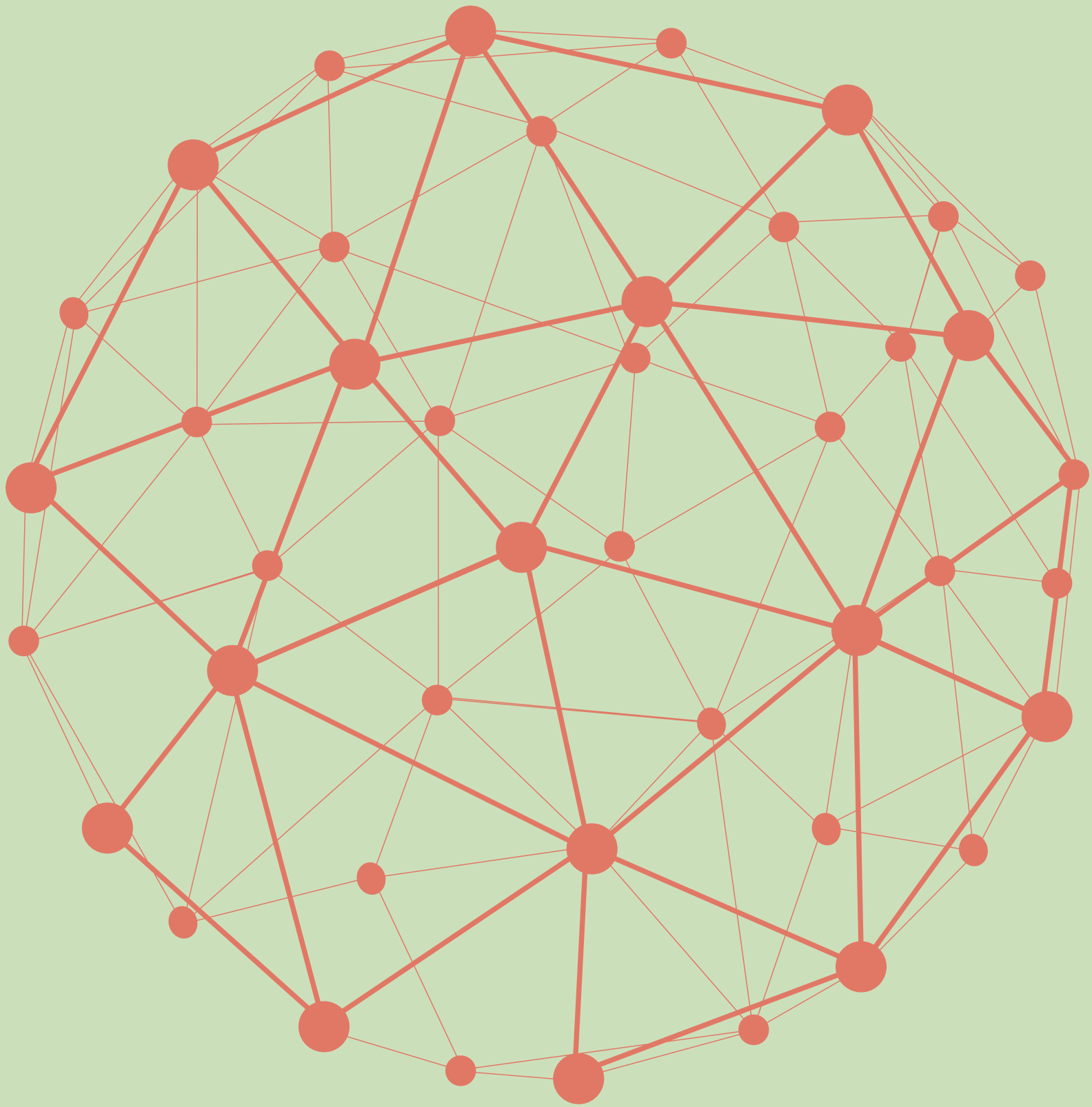
Cultural and Recreational Value

Many societies value nature for its beauty, spiritual significance, and recreational opportunities. Conserving biodiversity helps preserve these values for future generations.





Conserving biodiversity globally means taking actions that have local impacts. For example, protecting the habitats of the Iberian Lynx not only aids this particular species but also supports the entire ecosystem in which it lives, including other species that depend on that habitat.



Global biodiversity conservation is not just about saving individual species; it's about preserving the intricate web of life that supports the planet's health and humanity's survival.



By focusing on endemic and threatened species, and implementing conservation efforts in places like Europe's diverse forests, we can help ensure a resilient and vibrant world for future generations.

EXAMPLES OF PROTECTED SPECIES IN EUROPEAN FORESTS



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Natura 2000

European Union-wide initiative aimed at conserving natural habitats, wild flora, and fauna across Europe. The network is the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world and is a cornerstone of the EU's biodiversity conservation policy.



ANIMALS

Iberian Lynx (*Lynx pardinus*)

Once considered the world's most endangered cat species, conservation efforts in Spain and Portugal have helped increase its numbers.

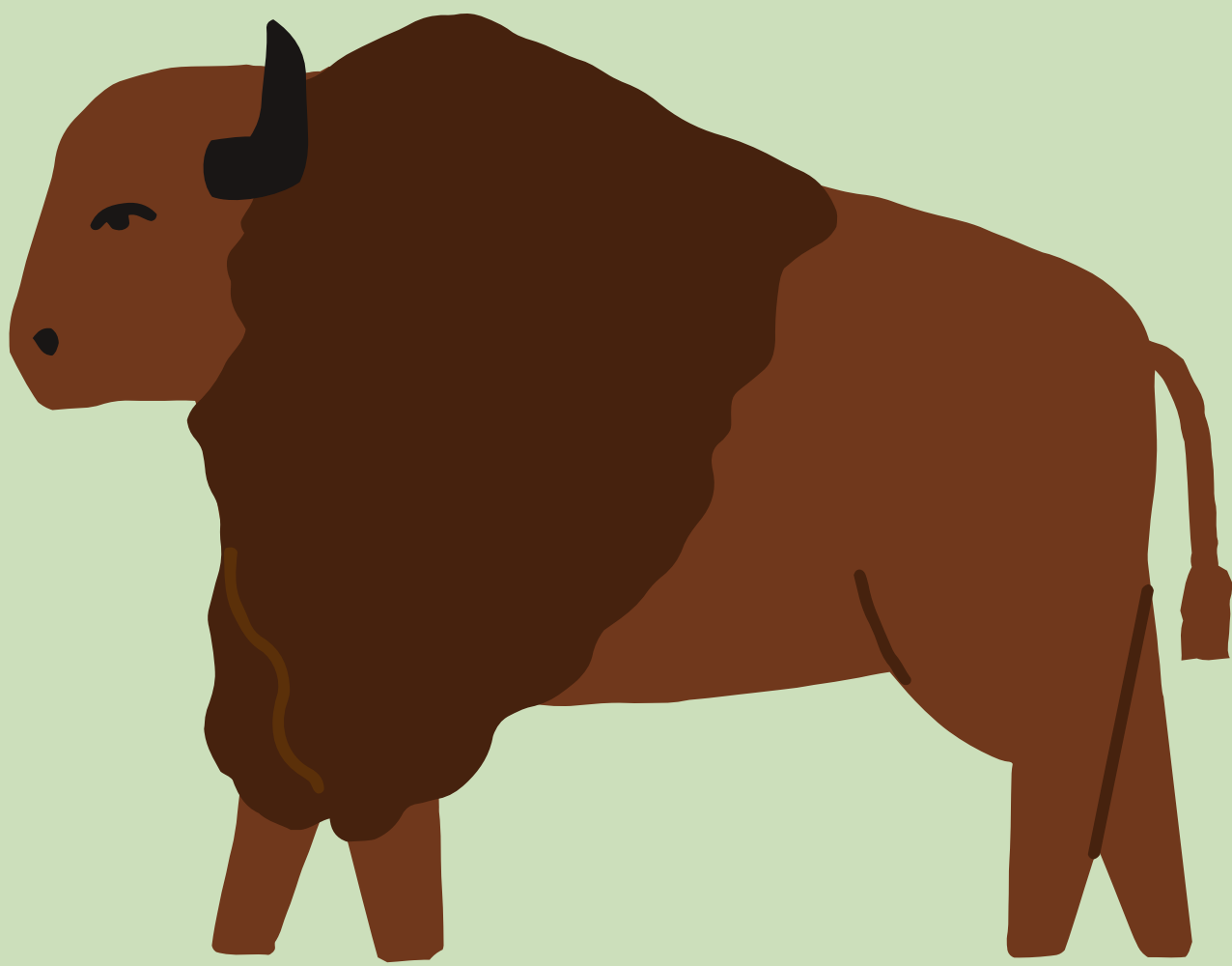


The Iberian lynx is a great example of a species recovering due to conservation efforts, but it is not a typical forest species, being more associated to open forests (low density of trees) with shrubland in the understory, and to shrubland.

European Bison

(*Bison bonasus*)

Europe's largest land mammal, the European Bison, got extinct in the wild, and was reintroduced after a breeding programme using captive animals. Forests in Poland and Belarus, among others, now host free-ranging populations thanks to these efforts.



TREES



European Beech ***(Fagus sylvatica)***

Ancient and primeval beech forests across several European countries are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These forests are protected for their exceptional biodiversity and the role they play in ecological processes.

Holm Oak (*Quercus ilex*):

Found in the Mediterranean region, the Holm Oak forests are valuable ecosystems supporting a variety of wildlife. Conservation efforts help protect these habitats from deforestation and degradation.



CONSERVATION AREAS IN EUROPE



PRIMEVAL BEECH FORESTS OF THE CARPATHIANS AND OTHER REGIONS OF EUROPE

Spanning across 12 countries,
these forests are protected for
their untouched ecological
value and biodiversity.





BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST

Straddling the border between Poland and Belarus, this forest is one of the last and largest remaining parts of the immense primeval forest that once stretched across the European Plain. It is home to the European Bison among other species.

ROLE OF BIODIVERSITY IN MAINTAINING ECOSYSTEM RESILIENCE TO FIRE



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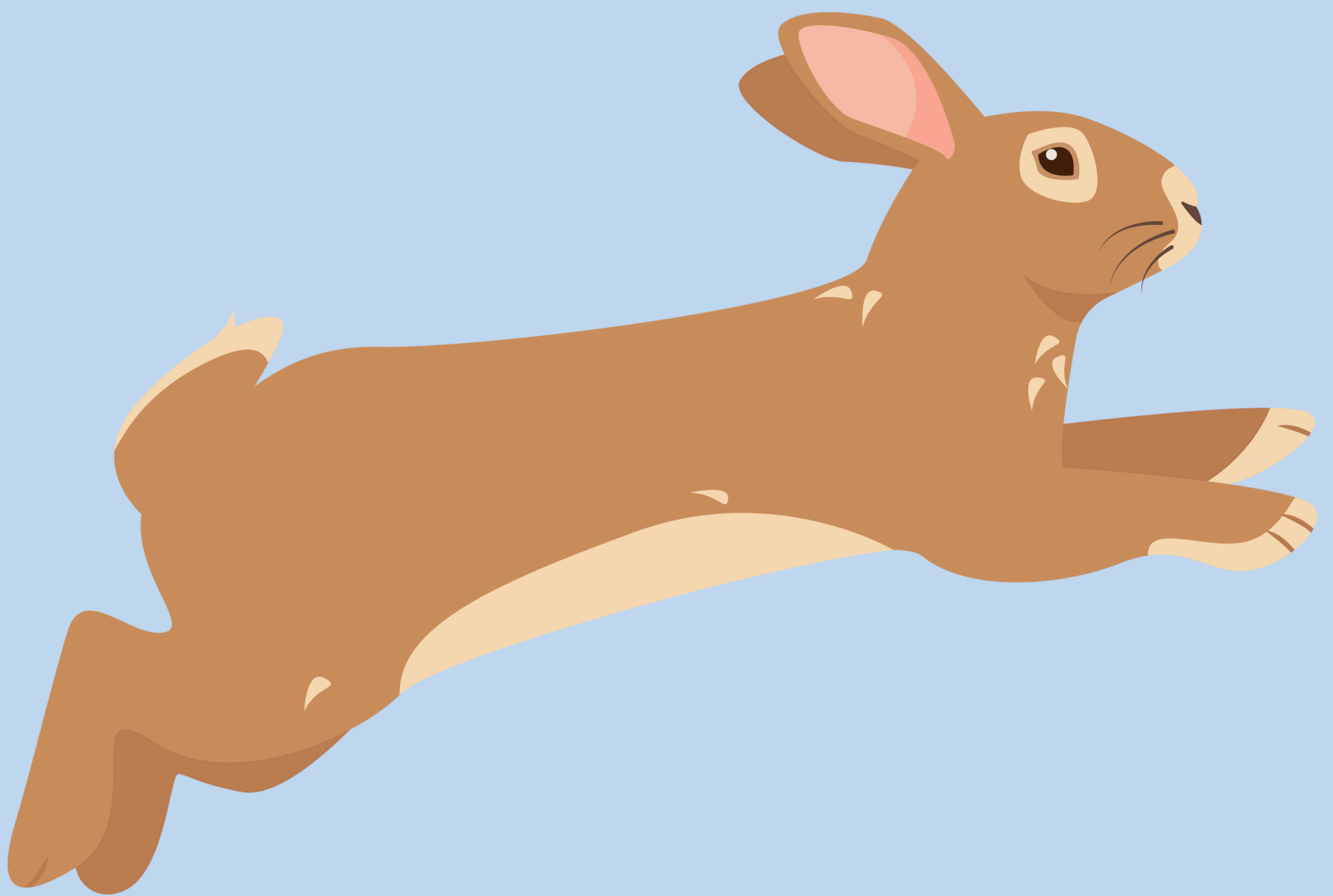


Biodiversity plays a crucial role in maintaining ecosystem resilience to fire. Resilience refers to the ability of an ecosystem to absorb disturbances like fires and still retain its essential structure, functions, and processes.

Biodiversity, which includes the variety of plants, animals, microorganisms, and the genetic diversity among them, contributes to resilience in several key ways:



SPECIES DIVERSITY AND FIRE RESISTANCE



Variety of Traits

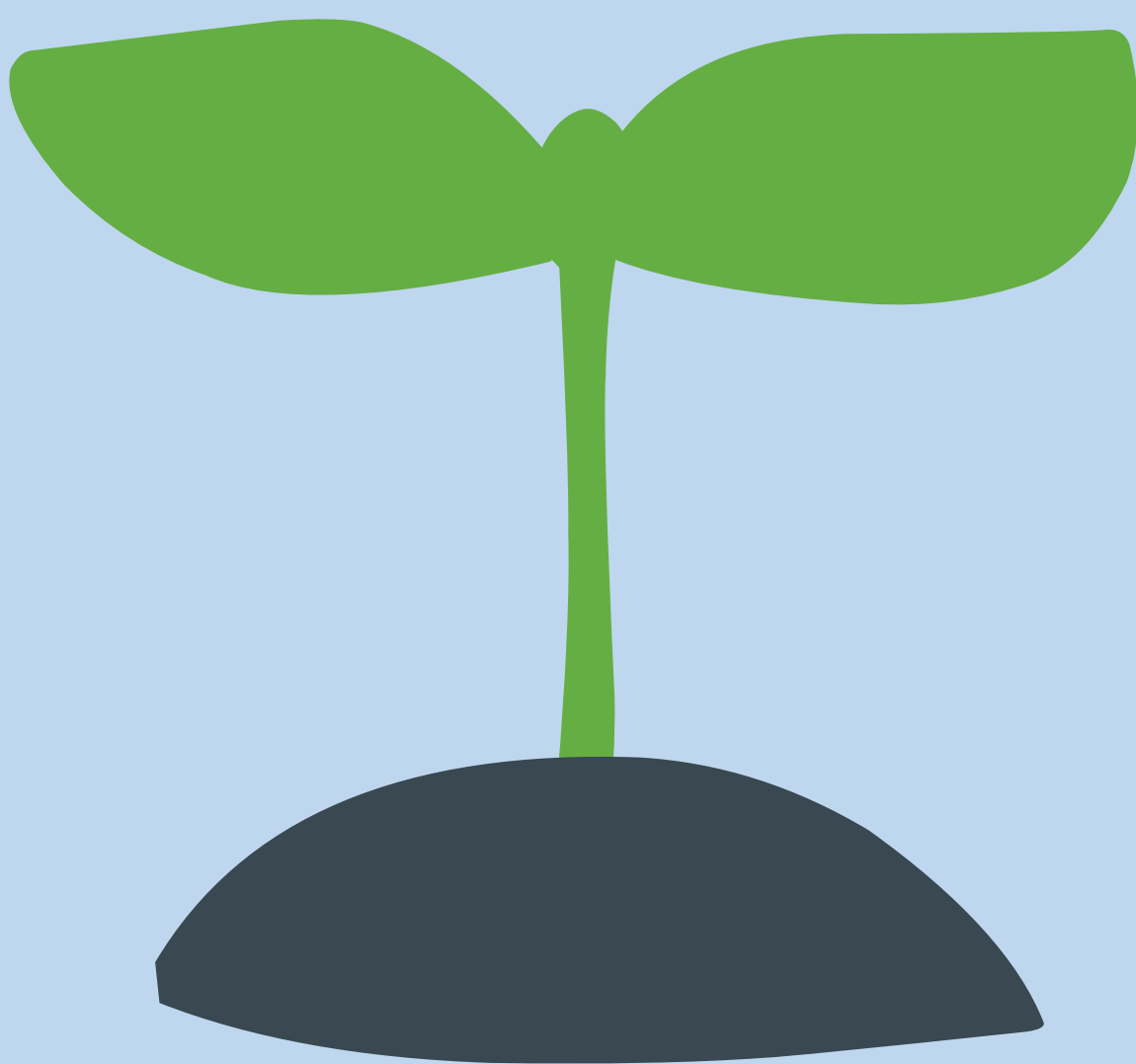
Different species have varied responses to fire, with some being more resistant or tolerant than others.



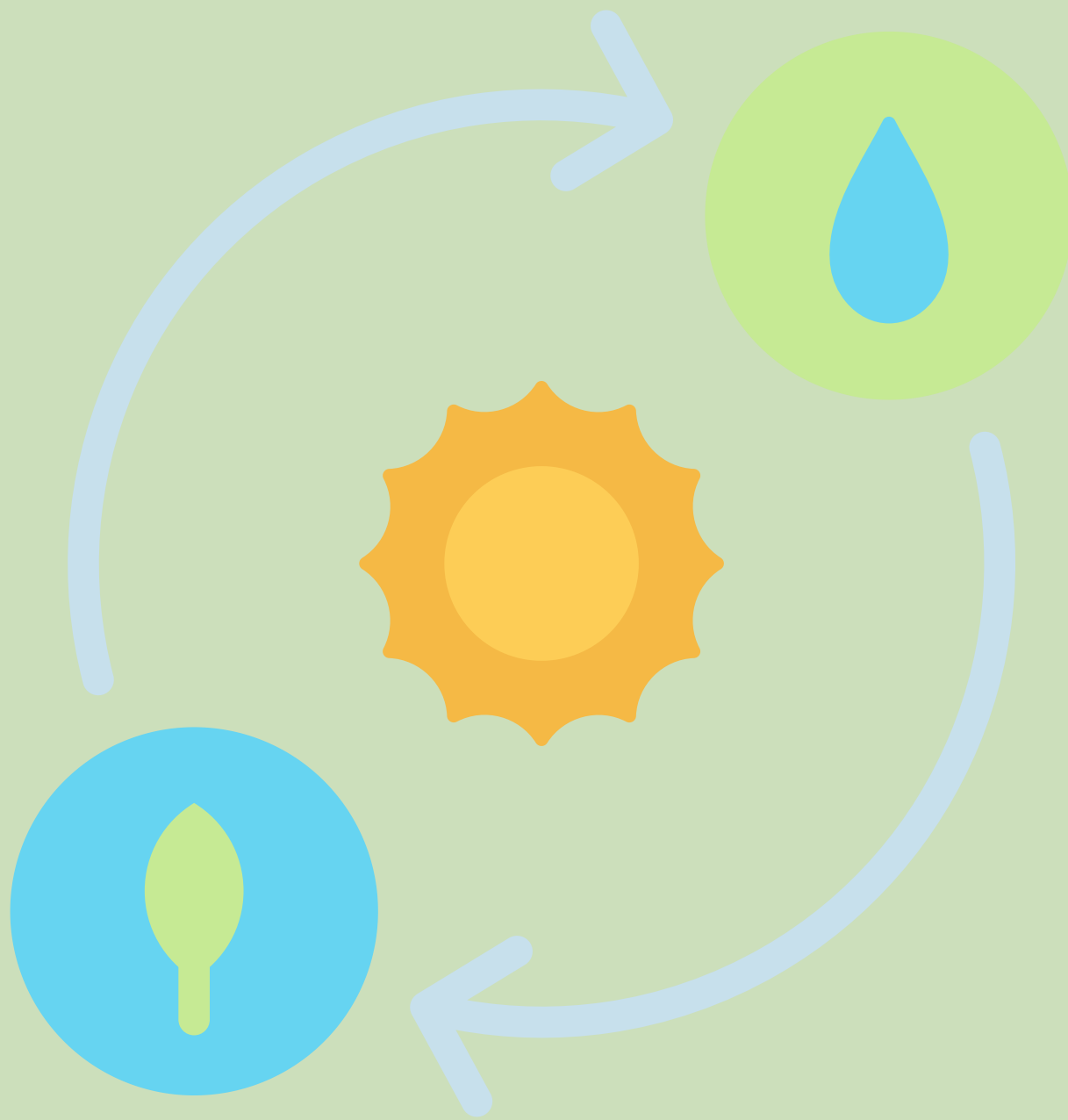
A diverse ecosystem includes species that can survive or quickly recover after a fire, ensuring that the ecosystem can sustain its functions and services post-disturbance.

REGENERATION NICHES

High biodiversity means that there are species with different strategies for regeneration after fires, such as resprouting from roots, germinating from fire-activated seeds, or quickly recolonizing from surrounding areas. This variety ensures that the ecosystem can recover more rapidly and effectively.



FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM PROCESSES



Ecosystem Functions

Biodiverse ecosystems support a wide range of ecological services, including nutrient cycling, soil formation, and water regulation.



After a fire, the presence of functionally diverse species helps to quickly restore these processes, contributing to the overall resilience of the ecosystem.



Redundancy

The redundancy principle states that multiple species can perform similar roles in an ecosystem. This means if a fire affects one species, others can still maintain critical ecosystem functions, reducing the impact on the ecosystem's health and productivity.

LANDSCAPE DIVERSITY AND FIRE SPREAD



Habitat Mosaics

Biodiversity contributes to a mosaic of habitats and land cover types within a landscape.



This diversity can act as a natural firebreak, limiting the spread and intensity of fires. Different vegetation types can have varying flammability, and a heterogenous landscape can slow down or redirect fire movement.

MICROCLIMATE REGULATION

Diverse ecosystems can influence local microclimates, potentially reducing fire risk. For example, areas with dense vegetation can maintain higher humidity levels and lower temperatures, which can decrease the likelihood of fire ignition and spread.



GENETIC DIVERSITY AND ADAPTATION



Adaptive Potential

Genetic diversity within species is critical for adaptation to changing conditions, including increased fire frequency or intensity due to climate change.



Populations with high genetic diversity are more likely to contain individuals that can survive and reproduce under new conditions, ensuring the survival and continuity of species and ecosystem functions.

COMMUNITY DYNAMICS AND SUCCESSION



Successional Stages

Biodiverse systems encompass a range of successional stages, with early-stage species often being more fire-adapted.



These species can quickly establish after a fire, providing a foundation for the succession of other species and the gradual recovery of the ecosystem to its pre-fire state.



In summary, biodiversity enhances the resilience of ecosystems to fire by promoting rapid recovery, sustaining essential functions, and providing buffers against fire spread and intensity.

Conserving and restoring biodiversity is thus a key strategy in managing fire-prone landscapes, helping to mitigate the impacts of fires and supporting the long-term sustainability of ecosystems in the face of changing fire regimes.



SPECIES PROMOTE FIRE AND CAUSE EFFECT ON FOREST ECOSYSTEM



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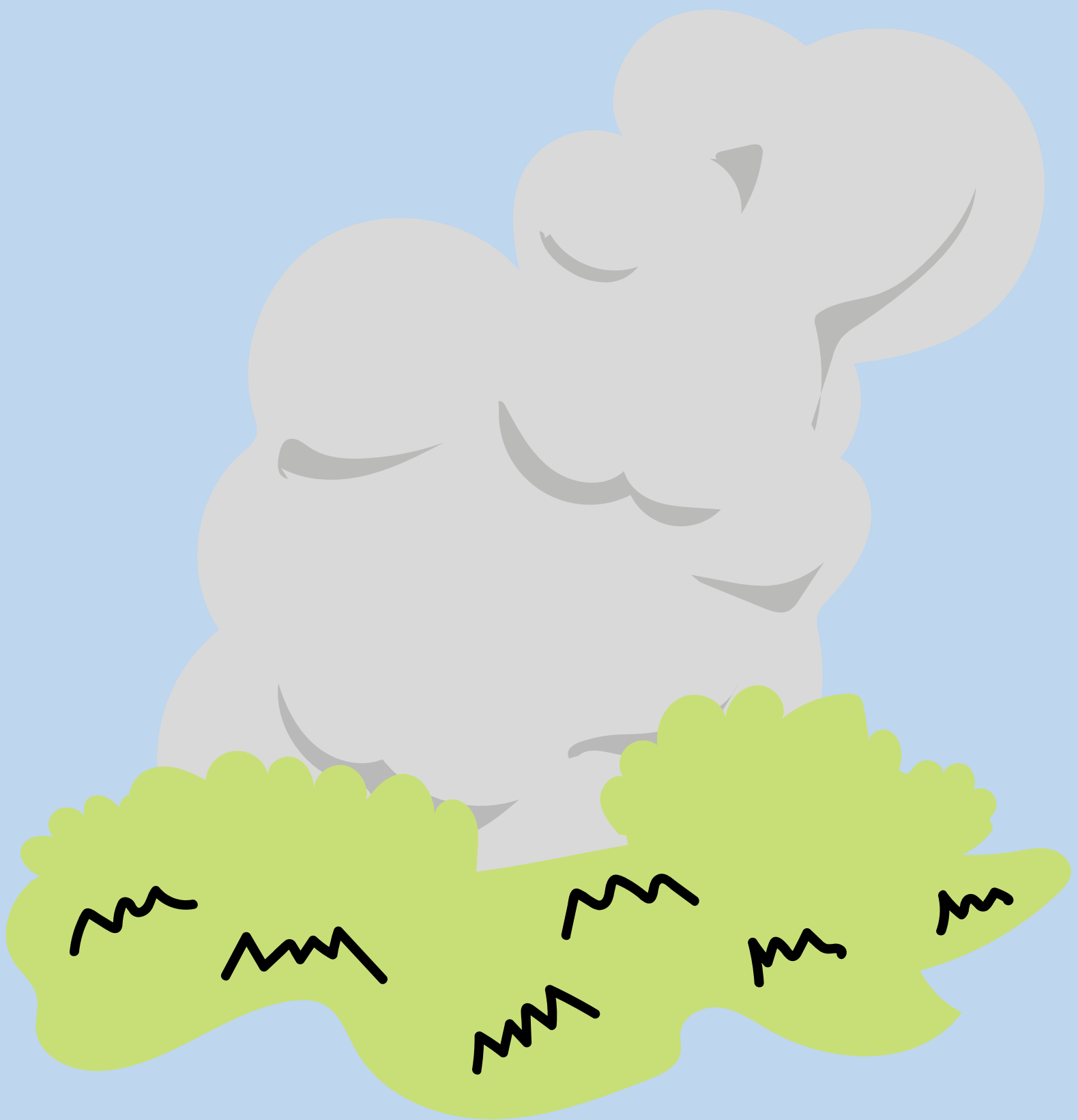


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In some forest ecosystems, certain species actually promote fire and can significantly impact the ecosystem's health and balance.

These species can affect fire behaviour and the fire regime (the pattern, frequency, and intensity of fires) in several ways:



FLAMMABLE PLANT SPECIES

Some plants have traits that make them highly flammable. For example, they might contain volatile oils or resins that burn easily, have fine leaves that catch fire quickly, or accumulate a lot of dry, dead material around them.



Eucalyptus trees are a well-known example; their oil-rich leaves and bark can intensify fires. In ecosystems dominated by such species, fires can be more frequent, intense, and harder to control.

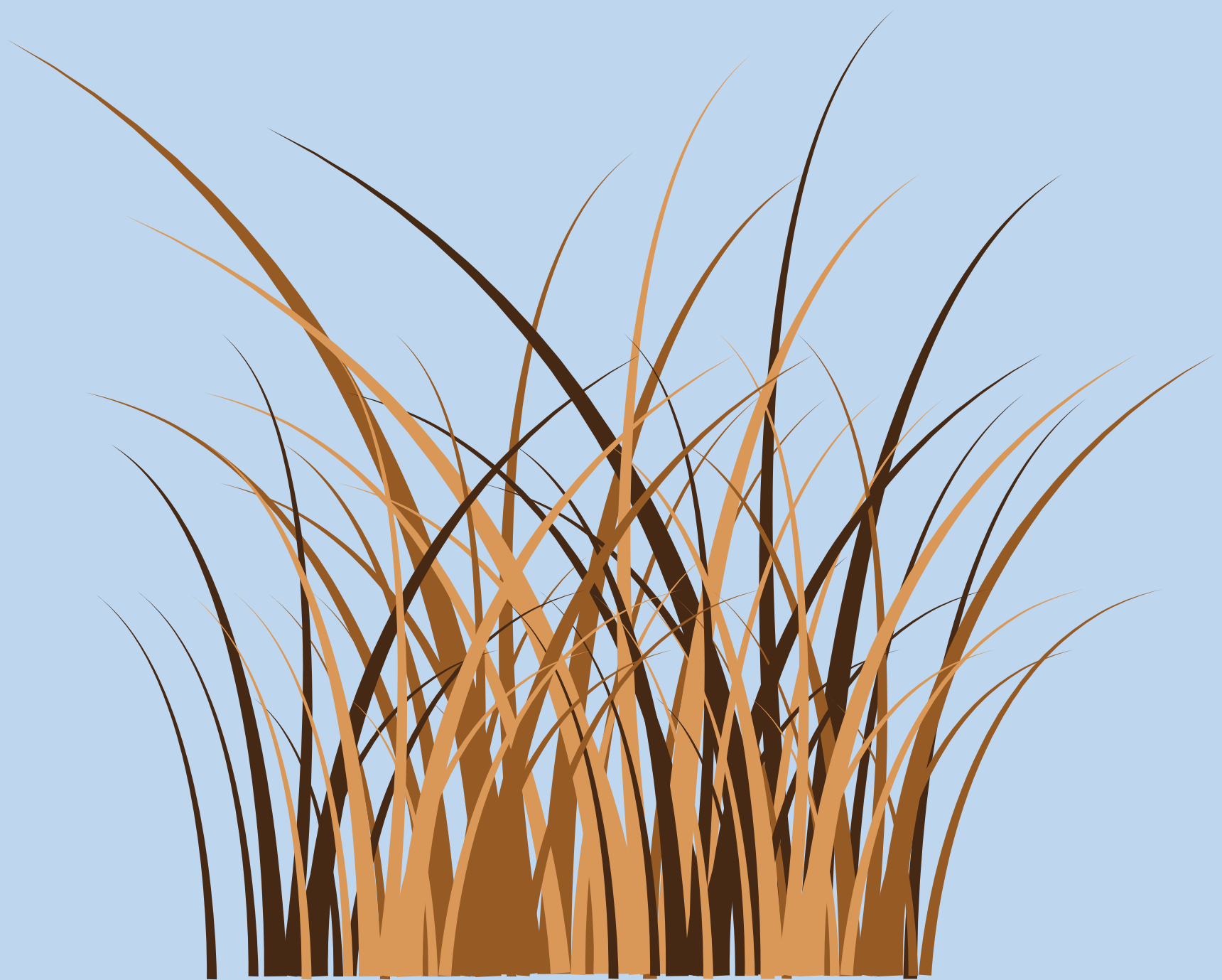




SPECIES THAT ALTER FIRE REGIMES

Certain species can change the way fire behaves in an ecosystem by altering fuel loads (the amount and type of material available to burn) and fuel arrangement.

For instance, invasive grasses like cheatgrass in the western United States can spread rapidly, covering large areas with fine, highly flammable material. This not only increases the likelihood of fire but can also lead to more severe and widespread fire events.



FIRE-ADAPTED SPECIES AND FIRE DEPENDENCY

Some species are not just tolerant of fire but actually depend on it for their lifecycle. These species have adapted in ways that allow them to thrive in fire-prone environments.



For example, certain pine trees have serotinous cones that only open to release seeds when exposed to the heat of a fire. While these species don't necessarily increase the frequency of fires, their presence and reproductive strategies are closely tied to the occurrence of fire, promoting a fire-adapted ecosystem.



IMPACT ON FOREST ECOSYSTEMS

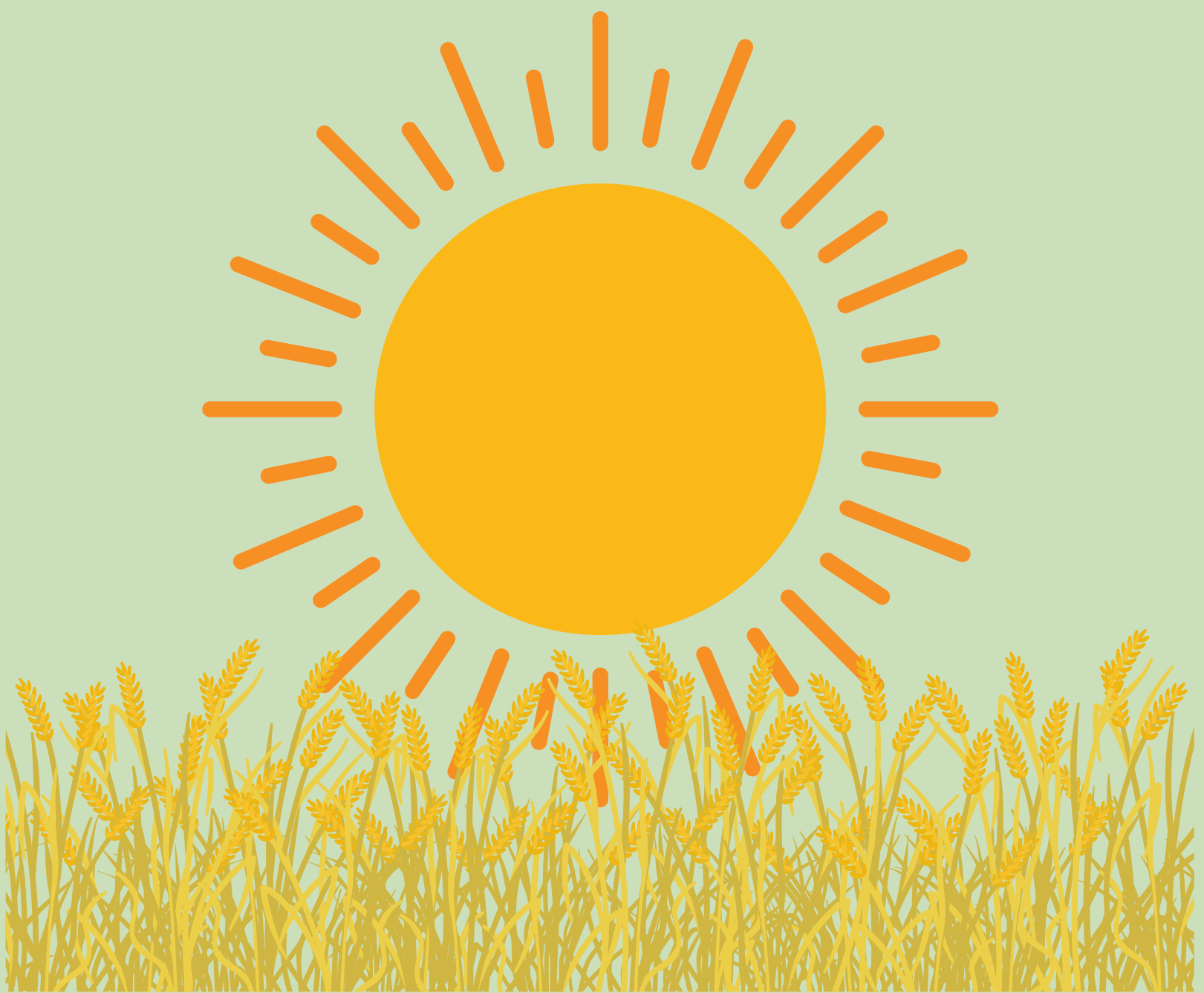


The presence and dominance of fire-promoting species can have profound effects on forest ecosystems:

ALTERED FIRE REGIMES

They can lead to changes in fire patterns, making fires more common, more intense, or both. This can shift the balance of ecosystems, sometimes favouring fire-adapted species over others and altering biodiversity.



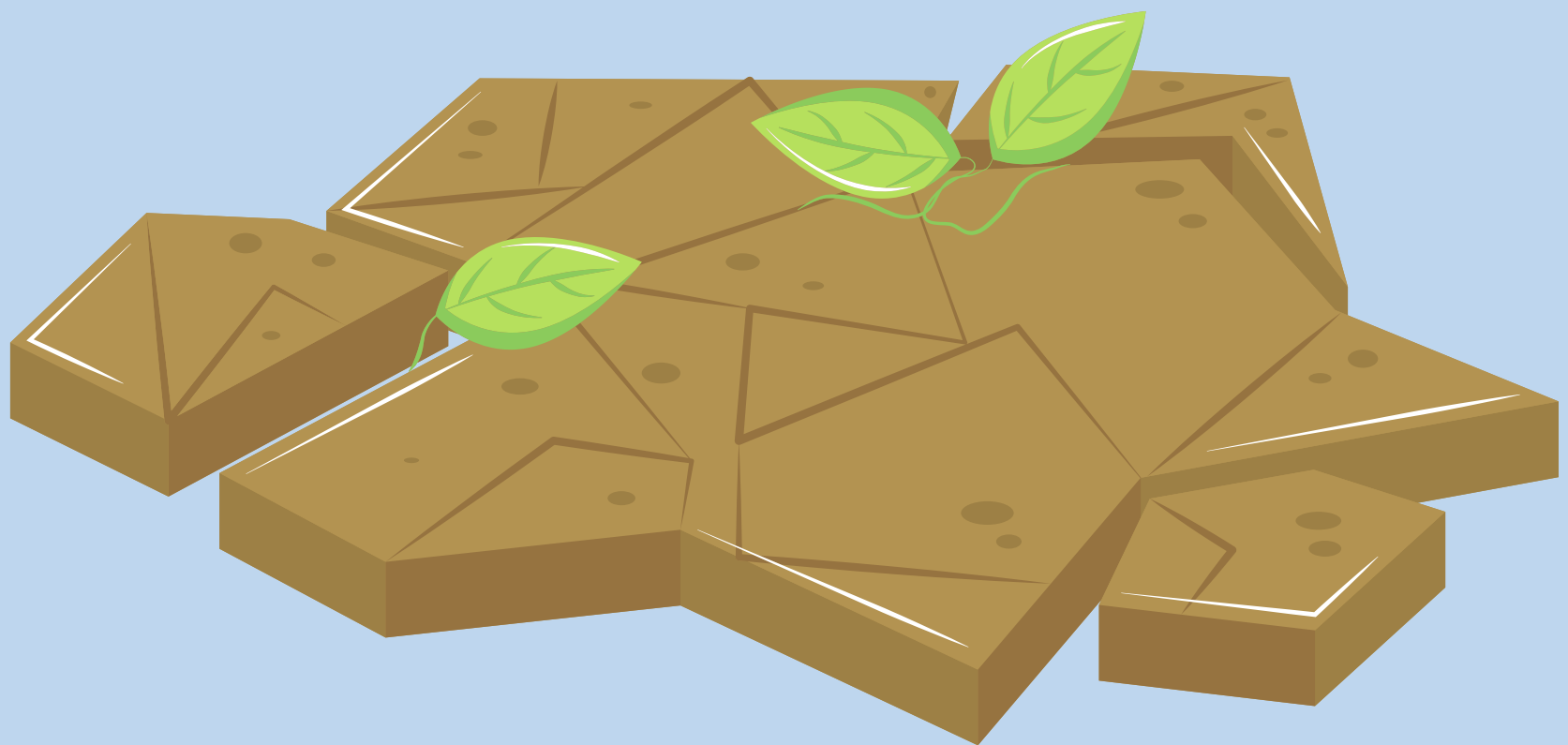


HABITAT CHANGES

Frequent and intense fires can transform habitats, making them unsuitable for some species while benefiting others that prefer open, sunlit, or disturbed areas.

SOIL AND WATER EFFECTS

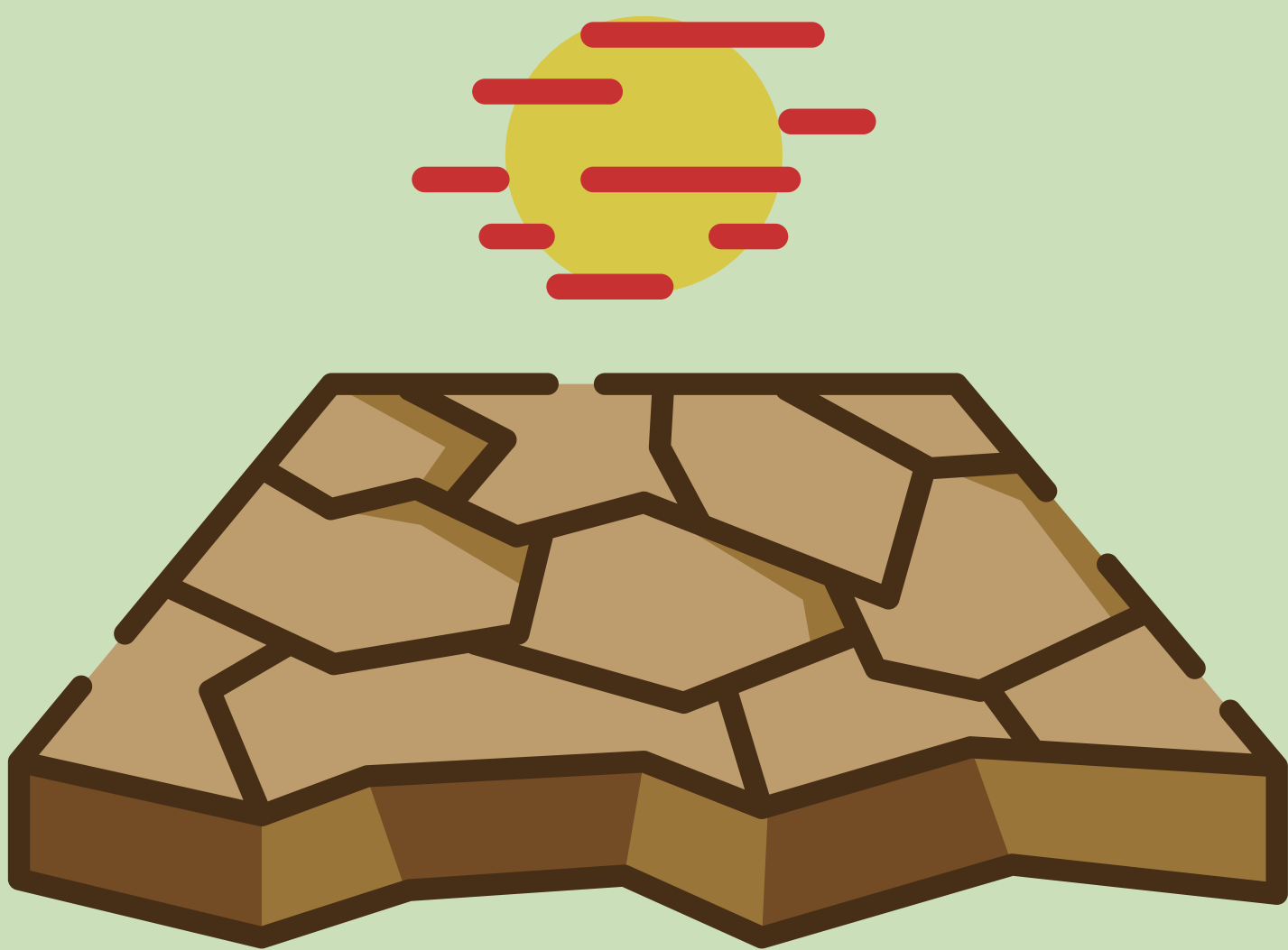
Intense fires can damage soil structure, reduce soil fertility, and increase erosion and runoff, impacting water quality and availability.



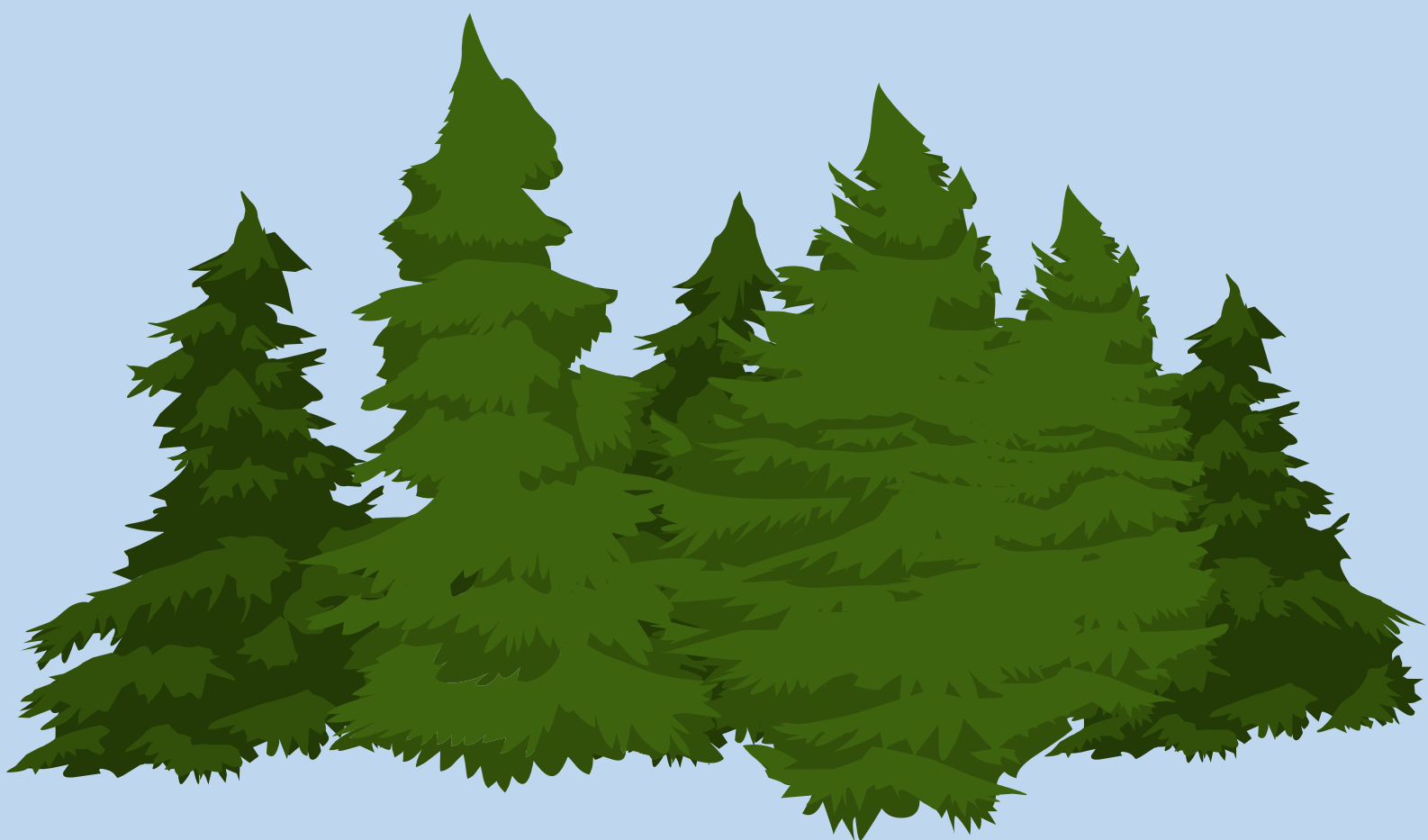
CARBON STORAGE

Frequent fires can reduce the amount of carbon stored in forests, contributing to increased carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

The presence of fire-promoting species reflects the complex relationship between fire and ecosystems. While fire can be a natural and essential process that promotes biodiversity and ecosystem health, changes in fire regimes due to these species—especially when coupled with human activities like land use change and climate change—can disrupt ecosystems.



Managing these species and understanding their role in fire dynamics is crucial for maintaining the balance and health of forest ecosystems.



SPECIES ADAPTATIONS TO FIRE



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Many species have evolved unique adaptations that allow them to survive or even thrive in environments where fires are common. These adaptations make them resistant to fire (able to survive and remain healthy during and after a fire) or resilient (able to recover quickly after a fire).



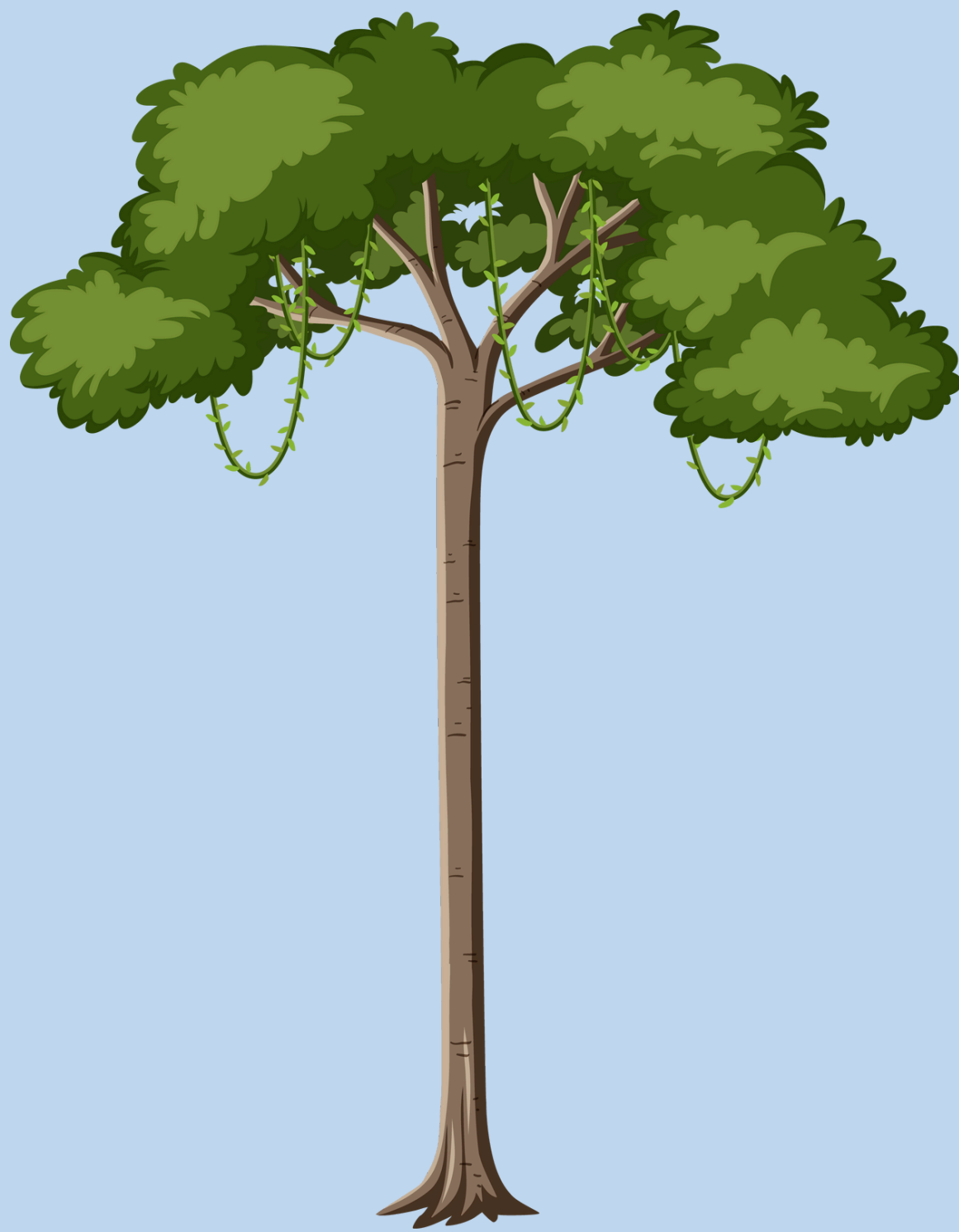
Here are some examples of these adaptations and how they work in fire-adapted ecosystems:

FIRE-RESISTANT SPECIES



Thick Bark

Some trees, like sequoias and certain types of pine, have very thick bark that insulates the vital parts of the tree against the heat of a fire. This allows them to survive even intense fires.



High Canopies

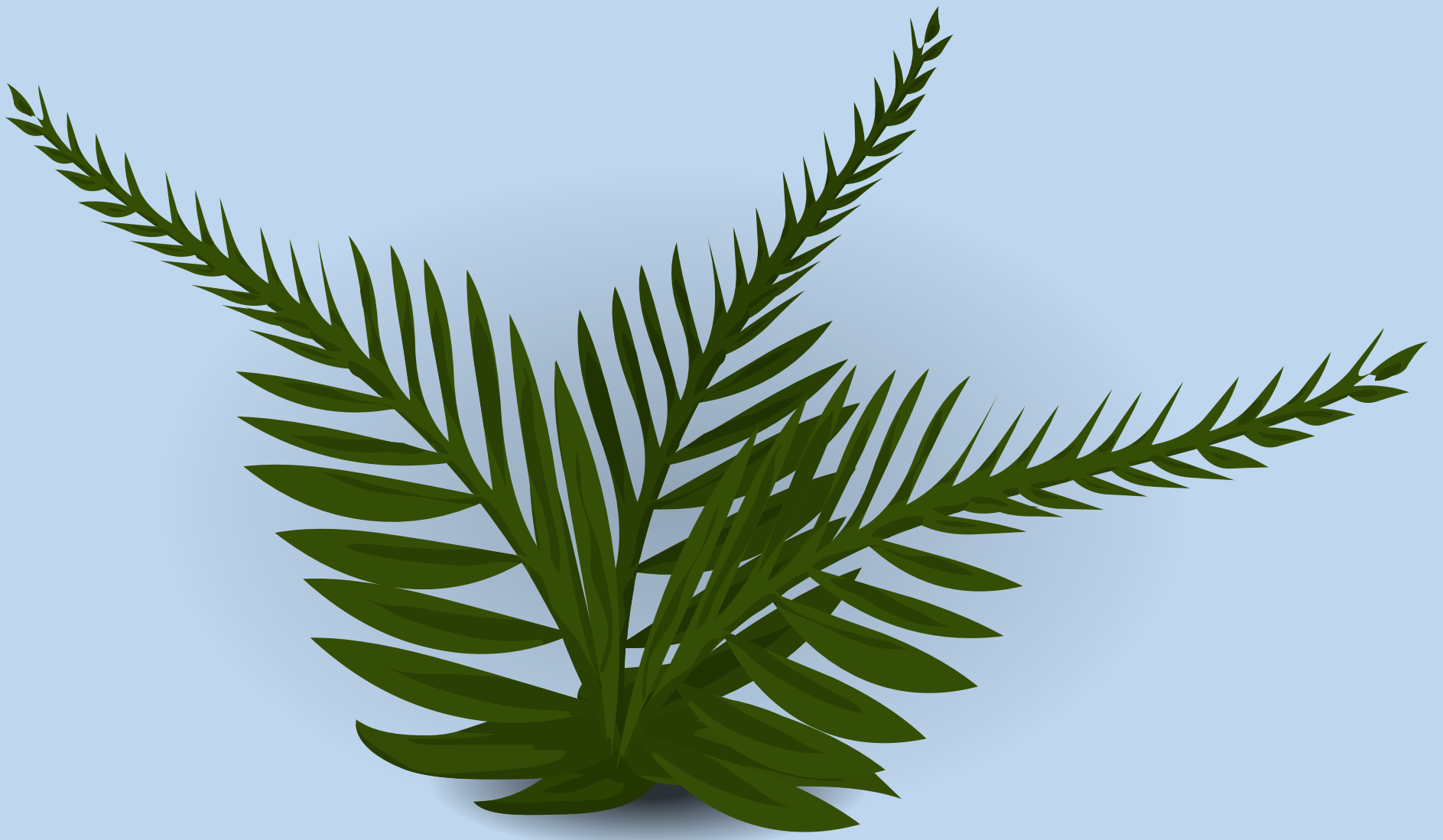
Trees with high branches and canopies, such as certain eucalyptus species, keep their vital leaf and reproductive structures away from the heat of ground fires.



Leaf Properties

Some plants have leaves that are less flammable, such as those with high moisture content or low levels of volatile oils, which makes them less likely to catch fire.

FIRE-RESILIENT SPECIES



Resprouting

Many plants, including certain shrubs and hardwood trees, can resprout from their roots or bases even if the above-ground structure is destroyed by fire. This allows them to quickly regenerate after a fire has passed.

Fire-Activated Seed Release

Some species, like the lodgepole pine, have cones that only open to release their seeds when exposed to the intense heat of a fire, ensuring that their offspring grow in an environment with less competition.





Fire-Induced Flowering

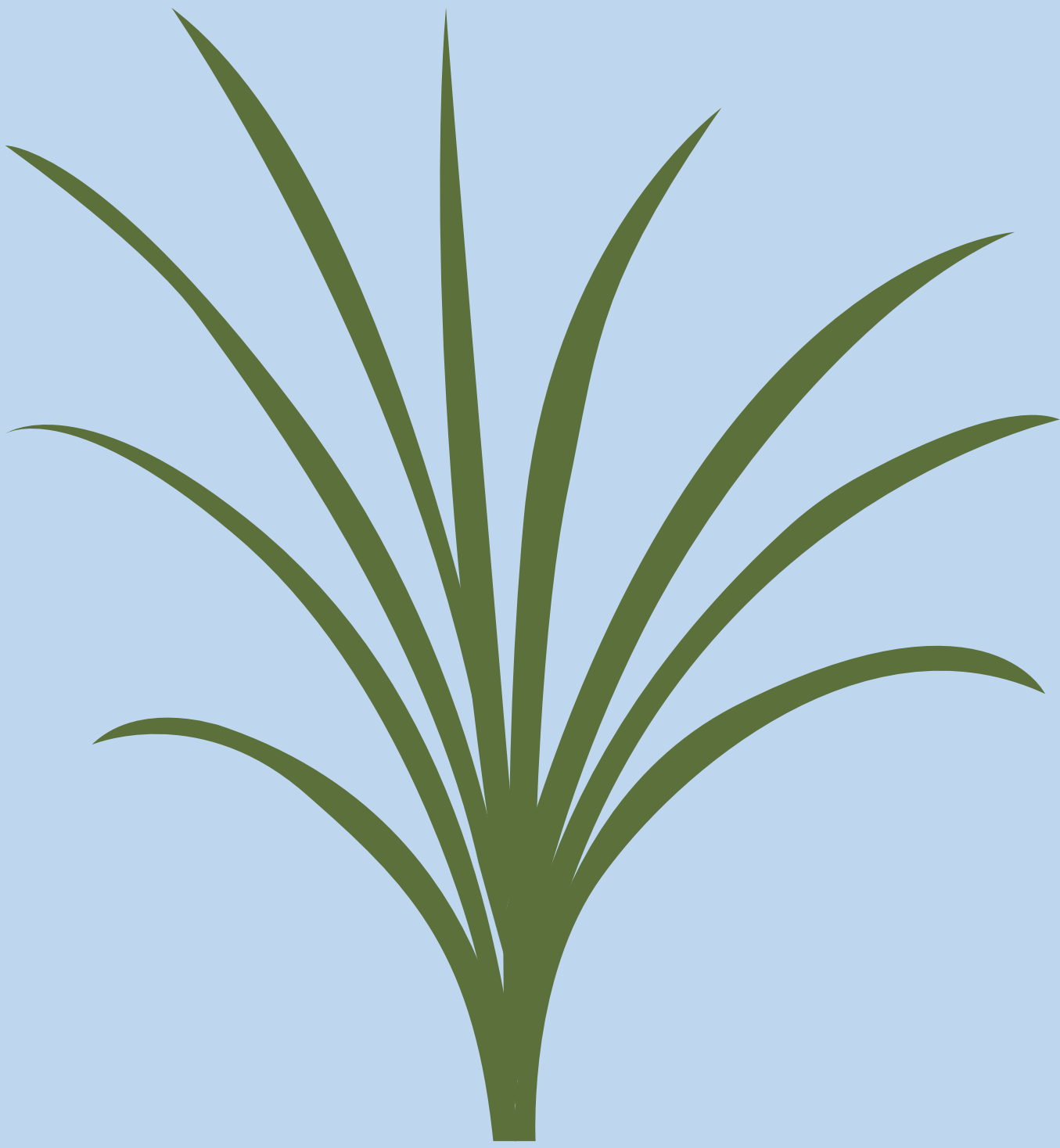
Certain plants may flower only after a fire, taking advantage of the reduced competition and increased sunlight on the forest floor.

FIRE-ADAPTED ECOSYSTEMS



Savannas and Grasslands

These ecosystems are adapted to frequent fires. The grasses quickly resprout from their bases or roots after a fire, which helps to maintain the open landscape. Fire removes dead plant material, stimulates new growth, and maintains biodiversity by preventing the encroachment of woody plants.



Mediterranean Ecosystems

Characterized by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, these ecosystems have many plants with fire-adapted traits such as thick bark, underground storage organs (like bulbs), and seeds that germinate following fire.



Boreal Forests

These cold-adapted forests have species like the jack pine and black spruce with serotinous cones. Fires are essential for opening these cones and allowing seeds to disperse, ensuring the regeneration of these forests.



These adaptations and ecosystem dynamics show the complex relationship between fire and natural systems. In many cases, fire is not just a destructive force but a necessary part of the ecosystem's lifecycle, promoting diversity, renewal, and health.



Conservation and land management strategies often aim to maintain these natural fire regimes, recognizing the importance of fire in supporting diverse and resilient ecosystems.

STRATEGIES FOR CONSERVING AND ENHANCING FOREST BIODIVERSITY IN FIRE-PRONE AREAS



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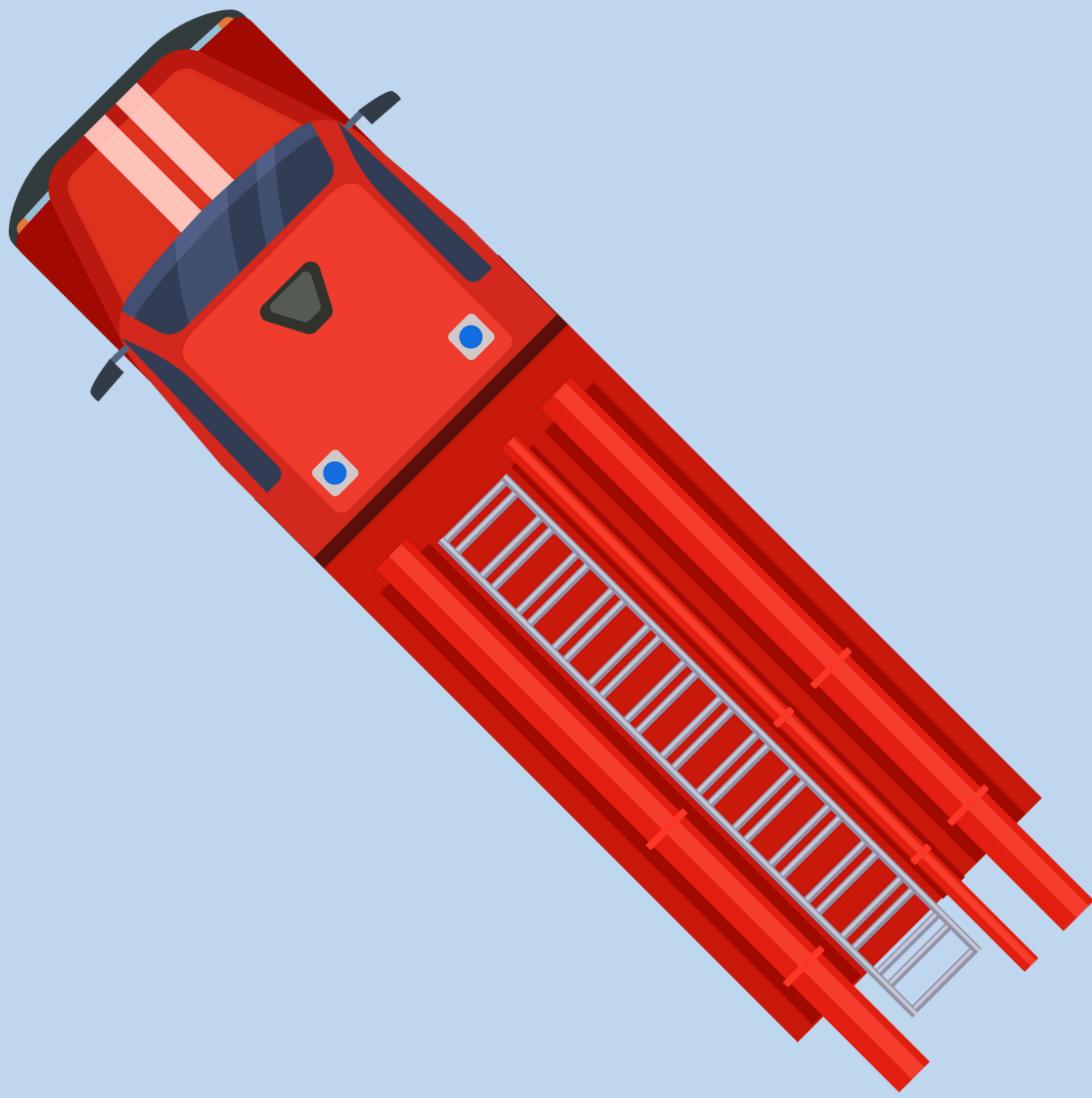
Conserving and enhancing forest biodiversity in fire-prone areas requires strategies that recognize the role of fire as a natural process while also managing its impacts to protect ecosystems and human communities. Here are several approaches to achieving this balance:

INTEGRATED FIRE MANAGEMENT



Prescribed or controlled burn

Using carefully managed fires to reduce fuel loads, mimic natural fire regimes, and maintain fire-adapted ecosystems. This helps prevent larger, uncontrolled wildfires. In integrated fire management, fire can be used to suppress fire during an incident (burn out and back firing).



Fire Suppression and Preparedness

Implementing effective fire detection and suppression strategies for when natural or human-made fires threaten ecosystems and human structures.

This includes having trained firefighting teams and equipment ready.

HABITAT RESTORATION AND MANAGEMENT



Restoring Native Vegetation

Encouraging the growth of native, fire-resistant species that are adapted to local fire regimes. This can help stabilize the ecosystem and make it more resilient to fire.



Removing Invasive Species

Controlling or eradicating invasive plants that contribute to fire hazards by increasing fuel loads or altering natural fire regimes.

LANDSCAPE-LEVEL PLANNING



Creating Firebreaks

Using natural and artificial barriers to slow or stop the spread of fire across the landscape.



Zoning and Land-Use Planning

Designating areas for different uses based on their fire risk and ecological value, including setting aside high-biodiversity areas as protected zones.

CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION



Reducing Carbon Footprint

Implementing practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate climate change, which is a key driver of increased fire risk.



Adapting to Changing Fire Regimes

Adjusting management practices to account for the ways climate change may alter fire patterns, such as by selecting plant species for reforestation that are resilient to expected changes.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION



Building Awareness

Educating communities about the role of fire in maintaining healthy ecosystems, the risks of uncontrolled fires, and how human activities can reduce or increase these risks.



Encouraging Responsible Land Use

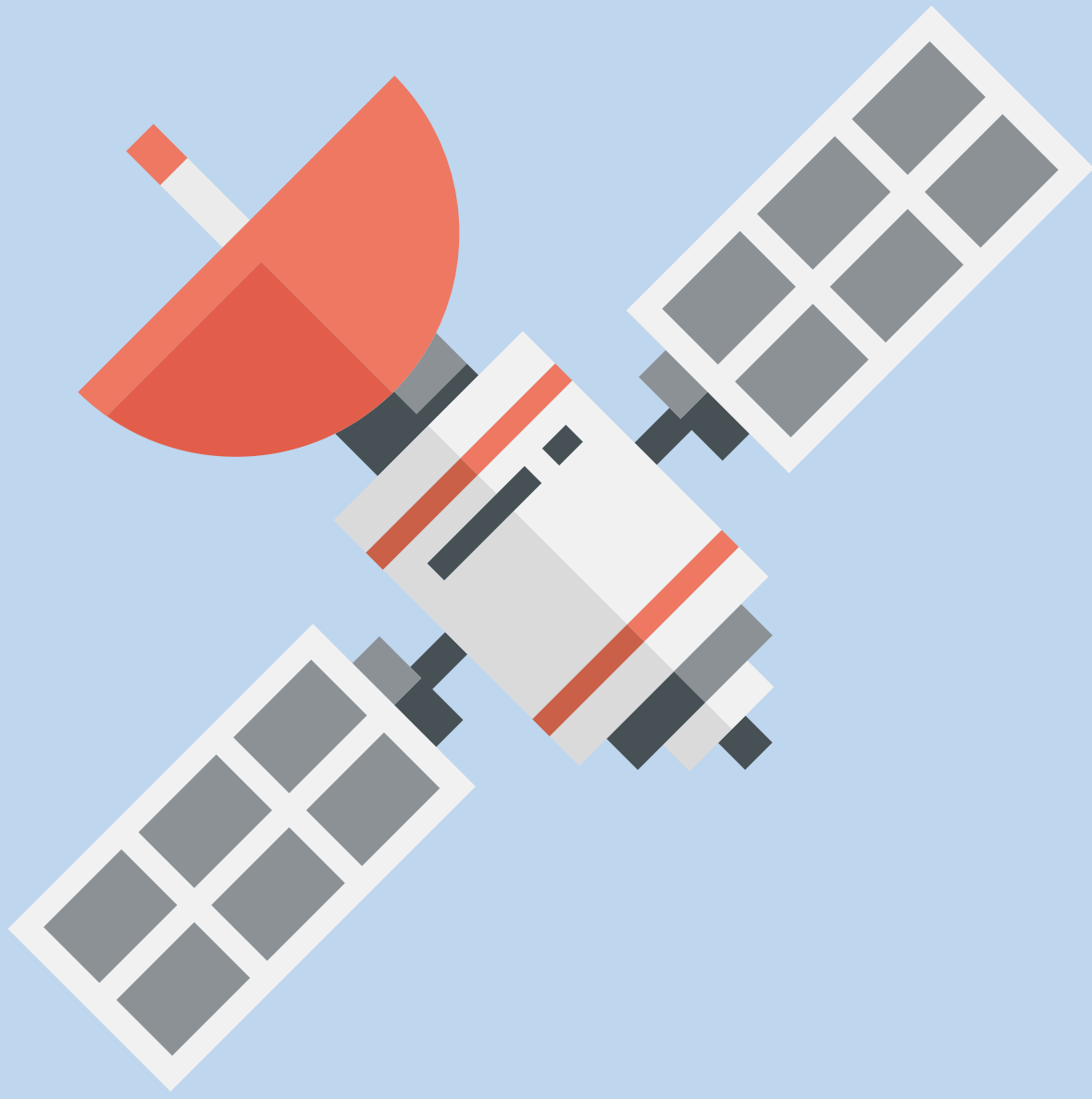
Working with landowners, local communities, and industries to promote practices that reduce fire risk and protect biodiversity, such as responsible farming and forestry practices.

RESEARCH AND MONITORING



Studying Fire Ecology

Conducting research on the ecological roles of fire and how different species and ecosystems respond to fire. This can inform management decisions.



Monitoring Ecosystem Health

Using satellite imagery, ground surveys, and other tools to monitor changes in forest composition, structure, and biodiversity over time. This helps evaluate the effectiveness of management strategies.

POLICY AND LEGISLATION



Strengthening Legal Frameworks

Developing and enforcing laws and regulations that promote sustainable land management, protect high-biodiversity areas, and encourage practices that reduce fire risk and enhance ecosystem resilience.

Implementing these strategies requires a coordinated effort among governments, conservation organizations, researchers, and local communities.



By integrating fire management with conservation goals, it is possible to protect and enhance forest biodiversity in fire-prone areas, supporting both ecological health and human well-being.