

Lesson 1

The Gift of the Nile

VOCABULARY

delta

Find!
out!

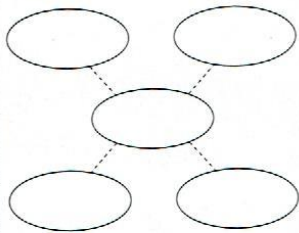
How did the Nile River affect the life of the people of Egypt?

Lesson Outline

- The Nile River
- High Water or Hunger

READING STRATEGY

Copy this chart. Write the main idea of this lesson in the center circle. In the outer circles, write how the Nile River helped the Egyptian people.



BUILD BACKGROUND

Each April, the people of **Egypt** waited nervously. The **Nile River**, which passed through their land, was at its lowest point. Soon the Nile would flood. When the waters rose, as they did every year, there could be rich crops.

A year of too little water meant hunger. A year of too much water meant disaster. The river is so important that the land of Egypt has been called "The Gift of the Nile."



THE NILE RIVER

About 2,000 years after farming began in Catal Huyuk, people settled along the Nile River valley in North Africa.

The Nile River flows through a desert. Fortunately, each year the Nile overflowed its banks. These floods helped ancient farmers turn the Nile Valley into a fertile agricultural area.

A Great River

The Nile is the world's longest river. It flows north over 4,000 miles from the mountains of East Africa. It passes through modern Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. Then the Nile empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

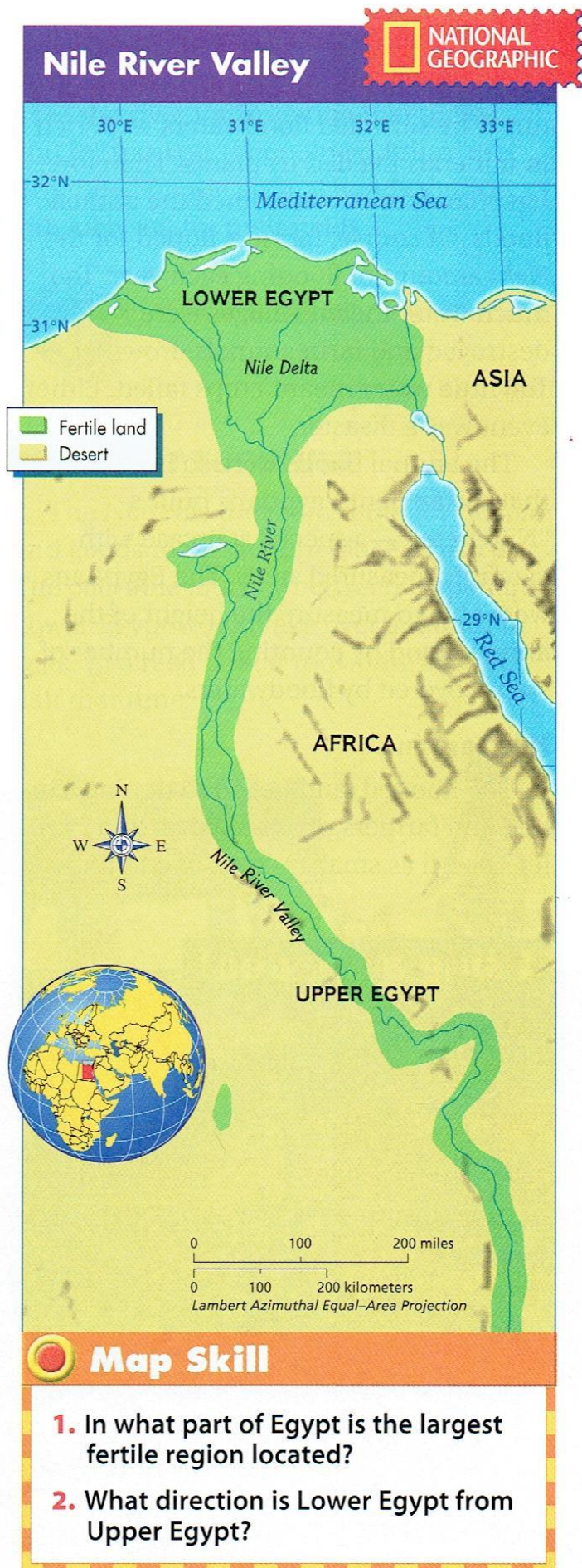
Much of East Africa has a rainy season from May until September. Heavy rainfall causes the river to rise, carrying silt as it flows north. When river waters reach Egypt, they slow and spill over their banks. Much of the silt is deposited where the Nile empties into the Mediterranean Sea. There the river divides into several branches, forming a vast, fan-shaped **delta**. A delta is very fertile, flat land made of silt dropped by a river as it drains into a larger body of water.

Northern Egypt is called **Lower Egypt** because it lies "lower," or downstream, on the river. **Upper Egypt** in the south is "upstream." In Upper Egypt, the Nile cuts through stone cliffs and desert sands. This landscape is very different from the fertile lowland of the delta.



What happened when the Nile flooded each year?

Both traditional and modern boats carry people and goods on the Nile today.



HIGH WATER OR HUNGER

Desert sand is unsuitable for agriculture. The silt-filled floodwaters were rich in minerals needed by plants. Therefore, Egyptian farmers welcomed the annual floods. Of course, farmers hoped for the *right* amount of flooding each year. Too much water meant villages were destroyed and farm animals drowned. Too little water meant crops failed. Either event was a disaster.

The annual floods were so important that the ancient Egyptians built a “Nilometer”—a special staircase with carefully measured steps. The Egyptians were able to measure the height of the annual flood by counting the number of steps covered by floodwaters.

Nile Farming

The flooded land began to dry in October, and farmers planted wheat and barley as well as smaller crops of cucumbers,

lettuce, onions, and beans. Farmers also grew flax, a plant used to make linen, a kind of cloth. To water these newly planted crops, the Egyptians used irrigation as the people who lived in the Fertile Crescent did. They dug canals and used a device called a shadoof (shah DOOF) to lift water into their fields.

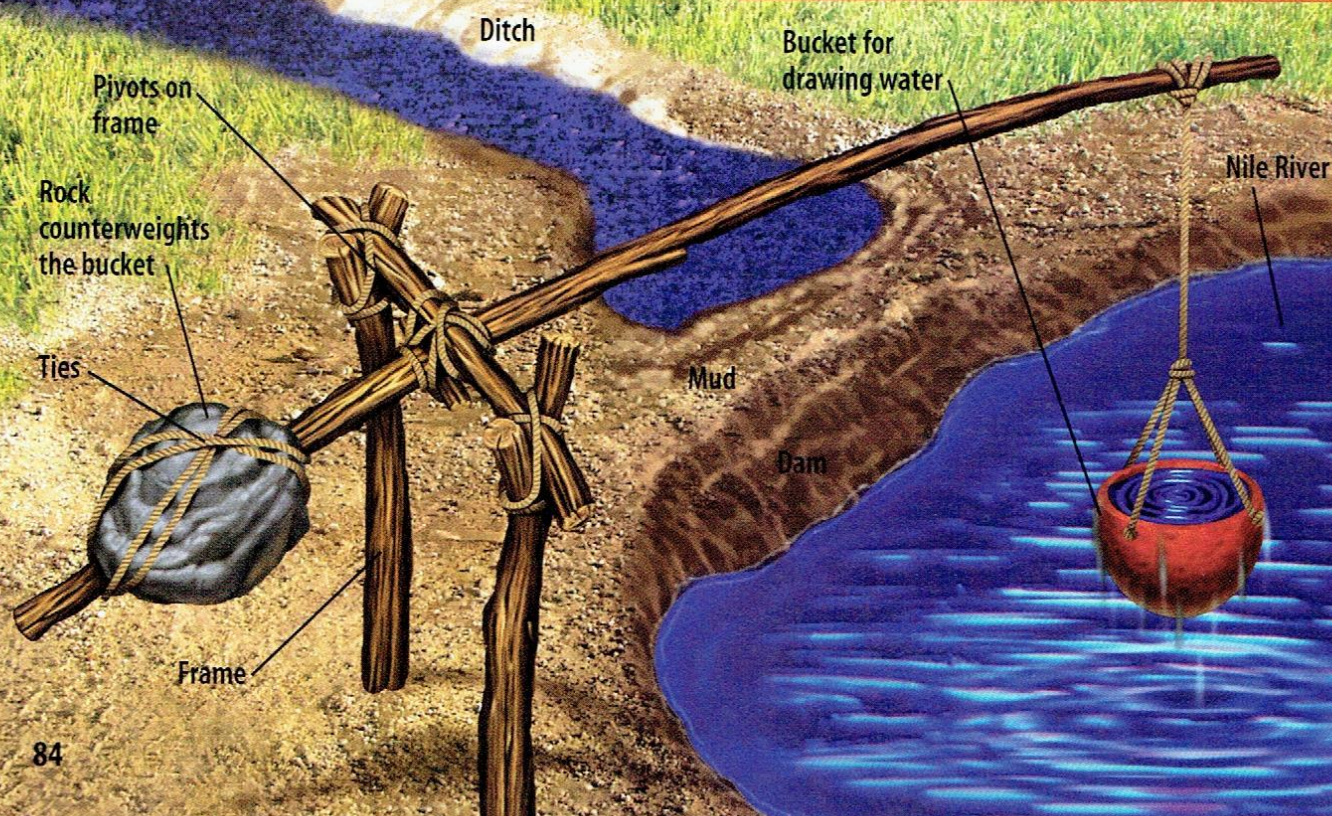
In March, crops were ready to be harvested. In good years, fields were filled with ripe vegetables and grains. Farming families had more food than they needed. This surplus was collected and taken to storehouses. As in Catal Huyuk, surpluses made specialization and community life possible.

Read this excerpt from an Egyptian song. What does the song tell you about Egyptians’ feelings for the Nile?

Diagram Skill

1. How did water reach the farmers’ fields?
2. What do you think was the purpose of the rock?

Using a Shadoof



Primary Source:

excerpt from "Hymn to the Nile"
— c. 2100 B.C.

Hail to you, O Nile!
Who shows itself over this land,
and comes
To give life to Egypt!
Mysterious is your pouring forth
from darkness,
On this day that we celebrate!
Water the orchards created by Ra,
to cause all the cattle to live,
You give the earth [water] to
drink, eternal one!
Path that descends from the sky . . .
you cause the workshops . . .
to prosper!

What did ancient Egyptians thank the Nile for doing?

The Nile River was the center of ancient Egyptian civilization. Egyptians used the river for irrigating their fields and for transportation. In addition, they depended on the annual floods to provide rich soil for their fields.



How did the Nile floods affect life for people in Egypt?

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

The Nile was the main route for people and goods to move from place to place. The 600-mile journey between Upper and Lower Egypt would take over a month to walk. In a reed boat it took only about half that time.



The British Museum

Review and Assess

1. Write a sentence for the vocabulary word.
delta
2. What happened if the annual floods were too great or too small?
3. Why did life for the people of Egypt depend on the Nile?
4. What **technology** did Egyptian farmers use to get water from the Nile to their fields?
5. How did Egyptians **solve the problem** of irrigating crops during the dry seasons?

End!
out!

Activities

Draw a physical map of the Nile region. Color the areas of hills and mountains a different color from the areas of flat plains. Make the delta a third color.



Write a journal entry for an ancient Egyptian farmer. Mention the floods and the tasks that the farmer would do.