The Nile and Ancient Egypt

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About 5,000 years ago, there was an ancient civilization slowly taking root in Africa. That civilization lasted more than 3,000 years. When it finally folded, it left behind a rich culture and some of the world's most fascinating structures. Amazingly, the civilization in question owed much of its existence to a river that flowed right through its land. That river is the Nile, and the civilization it nurtured is ancient Egypt.

The Nile is the longest river in Africa. It is also the longest river in the world. Stretching more than 4,100 miles long, the river travels from south to north. It passes nine countries along the way before it finally drains into the Mediterranean Sea.

Like many great rivers, the Nile is made up of several smaller rivers. Its three main streams are the Blue Nile, the White Nile, and the Atbara. The Nile gathers its headwaters near the Ethiopian highlands. Every year between June and September, melting snow and heavy rainfalls in that region would swell the Nile and create floods. This once-a-year overflow (called "akhet") had been going on for thousands of years. It was eventually put to a stop after the Aswan High Dam was opened for use in 1970.

The ancient Egyptians had no idea about the real cause of akhet. They thought it was an act of a god named Hapi. They believed that when Hapi made his annual visit in the form of floods, he left behind a layer of black, rich soil. This layer of silt was perfect for growing vegetation. As soon as the water receded in October, Egyptian farmers set out to plant. They harvested their produce around March, right before the drought season started.

Because the Nile helped irrigate crops and its overflows brought in fertile soil, the ancient Egyptians monitored the fluctuation of the Nile very closely. They feared a low flood as much as a high one. In either case, it meant not enough food and starvation! To measure and predict the water depth, the ancient Egyptians designed the so-called "Nilometer." A Nilometer came in various shapes. It could be a vertical column submerged in the water. Or it could be a flight of equal-sized stairs leading down into the river. Regardless what it looked like, it always had markings on the side to indicate how deep the water was.

Aside from using the Nile for farming, the ancient Egyptians also relied on it for fishing, traveling, and trading. When they moved upstream (from north to south), they would raise the sails and let the dominant wind push the ships forward, up against the current. When they moved downstream (from south to north), they would simply lower the sails and allow the drift to carry them to their final destinations.

With everything considered, the Nile was very important to the ancient Egyptians. It touched and affected almost every aspect of their life. Because of this, many people refer to the Nile as the cradle of civilization!

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Questions

1. Where is Egypt?
   A. Europe
   B. South America
   C. Africa
   D. Asia

2. What river helped nurture ancient Egypt's civilization?
   A. The Yellow River
   B. The Nile
   C. The Amazon
   D. The Yangtze

3. Which of the following about the Nile is correct?
   A. It is more than 4,100 kilometers long.
   B. It flows through nine countries.
   C. It empties its water into the Red Sea.
   D. It flows from north to south.
4. The Aswan High Dam stopped the Nile's annual overflow.
   A. False
   B. True

5. When did the ancient Egyptians expect Hapi's visit?
   A. Between January and April
   B. Between June and September
   C. Between October and March
   D. Between November and February

6. How long did the ancient Egypt civilization last?
   A. 2,000 years
   B. 3,000 years
   C. 4,000 years
   D. 5,000 years

7. When was the Aswan High Dam completed and opened for use?
   A. 1950
   B. 1960
   C. 1970
   D. 1980

8. Which of the following is NOT a main stream flowing into the Nile?
   A. The Red Nile
   B. The Atbara
   C. The White Nile
   D. The Blue Nile

9. When the ancient Egyptians traveled upriver, they raised the sails and let the dominant wind push their ships forward. What direction did the dominant wind blow?
   A. From east to west
   B. From north to south
   C. From south to north
   D. From west to east

10. The ancient Egyptians only feared low floods. They didn't mind high floods.
    A. False
    B. True

Can you think of three things other than the Nile that are related to ancient Egypt? Explain what those three things are.