



North Africa

GEOGRAPHY

Egypt's Threatened Nile Delta

For centuries the annual flooding of the Nile Delta directed the lives of Egyptians. Today, dams and other man-made changes upstream on the Nile River have altered its natural rhythms. This change has allowed more Egyptians to settle in the delta and make their living there. However, as the reading explains, Egypt has paid a price for this benefit.

An ocean of sand covers Egypt, divided by the dark green vein of the Nile River. The river injects life into the bright green fan at its mouth, while the gray, man-made mass of Cairo eats away at the fan's delicate stem.

The black soil of the Nile Delta has made it the foundation stone of seven millennia of human history. . . . The resulting lifestyle in the Nile River Valley and the delta—growing crops, raising domesticated animals, and fishing—sustained settlements that evolved into the ancient world's first nation-state. Long before the pharaohs built the pyramids, Egypt's glory was the agricultural wealth of its delta. . . .

Today Egypt's battle is to preserve the soil and water that have always given life to the delta. . . . For nearly 30 years the Aswan High Dam, 600 miles south of Cairo, has kept the river from flooding and depositing renewing sediment at its mouth. The delta has instead been inundated [flooded] with catastrophic [consequences]: It is among the world's most intensely cultivated lands, with one of the world's highest uses of fertilizers and highest levels of soil salinity.

Cairo's commercial and residential sprawl has locked priceless soil beneath miles of concrete; the discharge of chemicals into delta lakes threatens the fishing industry and the supply of clean drinking water; and the Mediterranean coast is eroding. If global warming causes the sea level to rise, as some predict, the city of Alexandria and the coastal province of El Beheira will be lost.

"The delta is subsiding," [Cairo University professor Mohammed] Kassas said with a helpless shrug. "It's tilting—the northeastern side is lower, and sinking a half centimeter [about 0.2 inches] a year; the northwestern side is sinking three millimeters [about 0.1 inches] a year. . . . Sediments now blocked by the Aswan Dam used to build up the delta but not anymore." . . .

The Ankh, the ancient Egyptian symbol of life, resembles a cross or a key, but it might also be seen as a map of inhabited Egypt. The upright is the Nile, the crosspiece is the east and west—the daily birth and death of the sun—and the loop is the delta. [Most] of Egypt's population lives in the loop of the ankh, on the alluvial [made of silt deposits] land that gave populated Egypt its ancient name Kemet, the "black land," as distinct from Deshret, the bleak "red land" of the desert. The loop meets the crosspiece

at Cairo, and it is here, where streets, parking lots, hotels, and apartment buildings have entombed hundreds of square miles of the fertile land, that you can view tons of delta soil in its mummified form: bricks.

“The use of baked mud bricks is worse than urban sprawl,” my friend Ibrahim Sadek said, frowning out his downtown Cairo window at new buildings with gray frames and red brick walls. “Those bricks come from the richest soil of the delta. Do you know, peasants were selling off the top yard of their land for brickmaking? And as if that wasn’t bad enough, if their neighbors didn’t do the same, then all the chemicals leached from the higher land into that lower land, worsening the soil quality.” The Egyptian parliament passed a bill to stop the practice, but the new law has not been perfectly enforced. “Think how many people have been affected,” Ibrahim said sadly. “Think how many seeds a single brick of earth could hold!”

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why has the Aswan Dam increased the use of fertilizer in the Nile Delta?

2. In what two ways has the growth of Cairo affected the delta?

3. Why is the preservation of the Nile Delta so important to Egypt’s future?

Activity

Draw an outline map of Egypt on a poster board and position an Ankh on it as described in the reading. Label the Nile River, the Nile delta, and the city of Cairo. Place drawings of things the reading says are threatening the delta on the borders.