
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE RIVER THAT BOILS ITS PREY ALIVE

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE RIVER THAT BOILS ITS PREY ALIVE

Deep in the Peruvian Amazon, there's a river so hot it can cook anything that falls in. The water reaches temperatures of 200°F—just below boiling—hot enough to kill an animal in seconds. For centuries, locals spoke of this river in legends. Scientists dismissed it as myth. They were wrong.

The Shanay-timpishka, which translates to "boiled with the heat of the sun" in the local Asháninka language, flows for roughly four miles through dense jungle. Unlike typical hot springs, which form small pools, this is a full-sized river—up to 80 feet wide and 16 feet deep in some places—with water hot enough to cause severe burns instantly.

Geoscientist Andrés Ruzo first heard about the river as a child, when his grandfather told him stories. Years later, as a PhD student, Ruzo mentioned the legend to scientists and geologists. They laughed. A boiling river in the Amazon? Impossible. The Amazon basin has no volcanic activity nearby—and volcanoes are what typically heat water to such extreme temperatures.

But when Ruzo finally visited in 2011, he discovered the stories were true. He measured water temperatures reaching 200°F and watched in horror as animals that fell in died within seconds. Frogs, lizards, and even small mammals that stumbled into the water were cooked alive almost instantly.

The river's heat source remains partially mysterious. Ruzo's research suggests the water originates as rainwater that seeps deep into the earth—possibly two miles down—where it's heated by the planet's natural thermal gradient. It then rises back up through fault lines in the rock. No volcano required.

The Shanay-timpishka is sacred to local communities and plays an important role in traditional medicine. Shamans use its waters in healing ceremonies. Ruzo has worked with indigenous leaders to protect the river from development, including proposed logging and oil drilling operations.

The river that scientists said couldn't exist now stands as a reminder: sometimes the stories we dismiss as legends are simply truths we haven't verified yet.

Word Count: 332 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: National Geographic

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

How hot can the water in the Shanay-timpishka river get?

- ☐ A) About 100°F
- ☐ B) About 150°F
- ☐ C) About 200°F
- ☐ D) About 300°F

2

Why did scientists initially believe the boiling river couldn't exist?

- ☐ A) The Amazon is too cold
- ☐ B) There's no volcanic activity nearby to heat the water
- ☐ C) Rivers cannot physically reach boiling temperatures
- ☐ D) No one had ever photographed it

3

What does 'thermal gradient' most likely refer to based on context?

- ☐ A) The pattern of river flow
- ☐ B) The natural increase in temperature deeper underground
- ☐ C) A type of volcanic rock
- ☐ D) A scientific instrument

4

According to the passage, what makes this river different from typical hot springs?

- ☐ A) It's hotter than most hot springs
- ☐ B) It's a full-sized river, not a small pool
- ☐ C) It contains unique minerals
- ☐ D) It only exists during certain seasons

5

The passage describes how scientists laughed at Ruzo when he mentioned the legend. What changed their minds? What does this suggest about the relationship between indigenous knowledge and scientific investigation?

6

The passage ends: 'sometimes the stories we dismiss as legends are simply truths we haven't verified yet.' What other examples can you think of where local knowledge or legends were later proven scientifically accurate? Why do you think scientists sometimes dismiss traditional knowledge?

ANSWER KEY

The River That Boils Its Prey Alive

1. C) About 200°F

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The water reaches temperatures of 200°F—just below boiling.'

2. B) There's no volcanic activity nearby to heat the water

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The Amazon basin has no volcanic activity nearby—and volcanoes are what typically heat water to such extreme temperatures.'

3. B) The natural increase in temperature deeper underground

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage explains water 'seeps deep into the earth—possibly two miles down—where it's heated by the planet's natural thermal gradient,' suggesting heat increases with depth.

4. B) It's a full-sized river, not a small pool

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'Unlike typical hot springs, which form small pools, this is a full-sized river—up to 80 feet wide and 16 feet deep.'

5. Sample Response:

Scientists changed their minds when Ruzo visited the river and collected temperature data—physical evidence that confirmed the legend. This suggests that indigenous knowledge, passed down through generations of stories and traditions, can contain accurate information that science hasn't yet verified. The passage implies scientists should be more open to investigating local legends rather than dismissing them automatically.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. Examples might include: medicinal plants used traditionally that later became pharmaceutical drugs; folk weather predictions that proved accurate; or stories about historical events later confirmed by archaeology. Scientists might dismiss traditional knowledge because it lacks formal documentation, uses different vocabulary, or comes from non-academic sources. Strong responses will consider both the value of scientific skepticism and the importance of respecting other forms of knowledge.

TEACHER GUIDE

The River That Boils Its Prey Alive

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Scientists dismissed the boiling river as myth until someone actually went to check. What other 'myths' might be worth investigating?
- Local communities consider the river sacred. How should scientists balance research with respecting indigenous beliefs?
- The river exists without any nearby volcano—nature surprised us. What does this suggest about how much we still don't know?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Science: Research geothermal heating without volcanoes. Diagram how water is heated deep underground.
- Research: Find another natural feature that was dismissed as myth until proven real. Compare the stories.
- Writing: Write a field journal entry from Andrés Ruzo's first visit to the river he'd heard about since childhood.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- National Geographic / Andrés Ruzo TED Talk