NOT BORING MEDIA

THE LAKE THAT TURNS ANIMALS TO STONE

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.

NOT BORING MEDIA — TERMS OF USE

TERMS OF USE

Thank you for your purchase! By purchasing this resource, you agree to the following terms:

• **FOR YOUR CLASSROOM:** You may use this resource with your own students, print copies for your classroom, and save to your personal computer.

• **PLEASE DO NOT:** Share this resource with other teachers (please direct them to purchase their own copy), post this resource online where it can be publicly accessed, or claim this resource as your own.

• **NEED MULTIPLE COPIES?** Additional licenses are available at a discount. Please contact us or check our store for site license options.

CREDITS & COPYRIGHT

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 LAKE THAT TURNS ANIMALS TO STONE

In northern Tanzania, at the base of an active volcano called Ol Doinyo Lengai, lies a lake that looks like it belongs in a nightmare. Animals that die near Lake Natron become calcified—transformed into haunting, statue-like figures frozen forever in their final poses.

The photographs are difficult to believe. A bat with wings stretched wide, as if caught mid-flight. A songbird with its beak open, as if still singing. An eagle with talons extended, ready to strike prey it will never catch. When photographer Nick Brandt published these images in his 2013 book, many assumed they were digitally manipulated. They weren't.

Lake Natron is one of the most caustic bodies of water on Earth. Fed by mineral-rich hot springs and sitting in a volcanic basin, its alkalinity can reach a pH of 10.5—approaching the corrosiveness of ammonia. Surface temperatures frequently exceed 140°F (60°C). The lake gets its reddish color from cyanobacteria that thrive in the harsh, salty water.

When animals die in or near Lake Natron, the water's extreme chemistry acts as a natural preservative. Sodium carbonate and other minerals seep into the bodies, hardening them over time through a process similar to ancient Egyptian mummification. The creatures become calcified—essentially turned to stone—and can remain preserved for years.

Yet here's the strangest part: despite being lethal to most creatures, Lake Natron hosts one of the world's most important breeding grounds. Nearly 2.5 million lesser flamingos—roughly 75 percent of the world's population—nest on the lake's salt flats. The flamingos thrive precisely because the water is so deadly. Few predators dare approach, and the lake's chemistry supports the red algae and cyanobacteria the flamingos eat.

The same water that kills creates a sanctuary. The lake that turns animals to stone is also a cradle of life. Lake Natron stands as one of nature's strangest paradoxes—proof that death and survival can exist side by side in the same blood-red water.

Word Count: 327 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Nature Museum

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 **What happens to animals that die near Lake Natron?**

- ◯ A) They decompose quickly in the heat
- ◯ B) They become calcified and preserved like statues
- ◯ C) They sink to the bottom and disappear
- ◯ D) They are eaten by flamingos

2 **What gives Lake Natron its reddish color?**

- ◯ A) Blood from dead animals
- ◯ B) Volcanic lava beneath the surface
- ◯ C) Cyanobacteria that thrive in the water
- ◯ D) Red clay soil along the shoreline

3 **Based on context, what does 'caustic' most likely mean?**

- ◯ A) Beautiful and colorful
- ◯ B) Capable of burning or corroding
- ◯ C) Cold and frozen
- ◯ D) Deep and mysterious

4 **According to the passage, why do 2.5 million flamingos nest at Lake Natron?**

- ◯ A) The warm water helps their eggs hatch faster
- ◯ B) Predators avoid the area and their food source thrives there
- ◯ C) Scientists bring them there for research
- ◯ D) They are immune to all poisons

5 **The passage calls Lake Natron 'one of nature's strangest paradoxes.' What is the paradox, and how does the author use specific evidence to explain it?**

6 **The passage ends by saying Lake Natron is 'proof that death and survival can exist side by side.' Can you think of other examples in nature or human life where something dangerous also provides protection or benefits? What does this teach us about how we judge things as purely 'good' or 'bad'?**

ANSWER KEY

The Lake That Turns Animals to Stone

1. B) They become calcified and preserved like statues

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states animals 'become calcified—transformed into haunting, statue-like figures frozen forever in their final poses.'

2. C) Cyanobacteria that thrive in the water

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The lake gets its reddish color from cyanobacteria that thrive in the harsh, salty water.'

3. B) Capable of burning or corroding

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage compares the lake's alkalinity to 'ammonia' and describes it as able to calcify bodies—both suggesting a burning, corrosive quality.

4. B) Predators avoid the area and their food source thrives there

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'Few predators dare approach, and the lake's chemistry supports the red algae and cyanobacteria the flamingos eat.'

5. Sample Response:

The paradox is that Lake Natron is both deadly and life-giving at the same time. The author shows this by contrasting the calcified animals ('turned to stone') with the 2.5 million flamingos that nest there. The same caustic water that kills most creatures provides safety and food for flamingos—'the same water that kills creates a sanctuary.' This contradiction is what makes it a paradox.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. Examples might include: forest fires that destroy but also help certain seeds germinate; predators that seem cruel but keep ecosystems balanced; bacteria that cause disease but also aid digestion; or even human examples like vaccines (using weakened viruses to protect). This teaches us that simple judgments of 'good' or 'bad' often miss complexity—something harmful in one context can be essential in another. Strong responses will connect the example back to the Lake Natron paradox.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Lake That Turns Animals to Stone

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

- Lake Natron kills most animals but protects flamingos. What other examples exist where something dangerous also provides safety?
- The calcified animals look like statues frozen in their last moment. Why do you think these images fascinate people?
- Should humans intervene to make dangerous natural places 'safer,' or leave them alone? Where's the line?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Science: Research the chemical process that calcifies the animals. Create a diagram explaining the steps.
- Writing: Write a nature documentary script describing Lake Natron—balance the deadly and life-giving aspects.
- Research: Find another place where extreme conditions create unexpected sanctuaries. Compare to Lake Natron.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- Nature Museum / CBC News, 2020