
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.

TERMS OF USE

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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 LAKE THAT TURNS ANIMALS TO STONE

In northern Tanzania, there's a lake that looks like it belongs in a horror movie. Lake Natron's waters are so caustic that animals who die in it become calcified—transformed into eerie, statue-like figures frozen in their final poses.

The lake's deadly chemistry comes from volcanic ash that flows down from the nearby Ol Doinyo Lengai volcano. This ash dissolves in the water, creating a toxic soup with a pH level as high as 12—almost as caustic as ammonia. Water temperatures can reach 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Any animal unfortunate enough to fall in faces a grim fate.

Photographer Nick Brandt discovered these calcified creatures along the lake's shores in 2011. He found birds, bats, and other small animals preserved in haunting detail—their feathers, beaks, and even expressions captured forever in mineral deposits. Brandt arranged some of these natural sculptures into artistic poses and photographed them, creating images that went viral around the world.

But here's the strange twist: while Lake Natron kills most creatures, it's also a crucial nursery for life. Nearly 75% of the world's lesser flamingos are born on its shores. The flamingos have adapted to tolerate the harsh conditions, and the lake's very deadliness protects their nesting sites from predators. What predator would wade into water that could burn its legs?

The flamingos feed on the red algae that thrive in the alkaline water—which is also what gives them their famous pink color. Without Lake Natron's extreme chemistry, these flamingos might not exist at all.

Local Maasai communities consider the lake sacred. They believe it holds spiritual power, and traditionally they've kept their distance from its shores. Scientists, meanwhile, continue studying how this deadly body of water supports such a vital ecosystem.

Lake Natron stands as one of nature's great paradoxes: a place of death that creates life, a killing ground that serves as a sanctuary.

Word Count: 314 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: National Geographic

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

What causes Lake Natron's water to be so dangerous?

- ☐ A) Volcanic ash that creates highly alkaline water
- ☐ B) Pollution from nearby factories
- ☐ C) Radioactive minerals in the soil
- ☐ D) Bacteria that release toxic gases

2

According to the passage, what percentage of lesser flamingos are born at Lake Natron?

- ☐ A) About 25%
- ☐ B) About 50%
- ☐ C) Nearly 75%
- ☐ D) Over 90%

3

Why do flamingos benefit from nesting at a lake that kills most animals?

- ☐ A) The hot water keeps their eggs warm
- ☐ B) Predators avoid the dangerous water
- ☐ C) The calcified animals provide food
- ☐ D) The lake water makes their feathers stronger

4

Based on the passage, what can you infer about lesser flamingos' physical adaptations?

- ☐ A) They have heat-resistant legs and can process alkaline water
- ☐ B) They never actually touch the water
- ☐ C) They only visit the lake at night when it's cooler
- ☐ D) They have developed immunity to all poisons

5

The author describes Lake Natron as 'one of nature's great paradoxes.' Which evidence from the passage best supports this characterization?

- ☐ A) The lake is both beautiful and dangerous to photograph
- ☐ B) The same chemistry that kills animals also supports flamingo populations
- ☐ C) Scientists and Maasai communities have different views about the lake
- ☐ D) The lake changes color depending on the season

6

How might climate change potentially affect the relationship between Lake Natron and lesser flamingos?

- ☐ A) Warmer temperatures would make the lake safer for predators to approach
- ☐ B) Changes in volcanic activity or water chemistry could disrupt the delicate balance flamingos depend on
- ☐ C) Flamingos would simply move to a different lake
- ☐ D) The lake would become more dangerous, helping flamingos even more

ANSWER KEY

The Lake That Turns Animals to Stone

1. A) Volcanic ash that creates highly alkaline water

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states that volcanic ash from Ol Doinyo Lengai dissolves in the water, creating caustic conditions with a pH as high as 12.

2. C) Nearly 75%

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage directly states that 'nearly 75% of the world's lesser flamingos are born on its shores.'

3. B) Predators avoid the dangerous water

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage explains that 'the lake's very deadliness protects their nesting sites from predators. What predator would wade into water that could burn its legs?'

4. A) They have heat-resistant legs and can process alkaline water

DOK 2 — Inference. Since flamingos thrive in conditions that kill other animals, and they feed on algae in the water, they must have adaptations allowing them to tolerate the extreme heat and alkalinity.

5. B) The same chemistry that kills animals also supports flamingo populations

DOK 3 — Analysis. A paradox is something that seems contradictory. The passage emphasizes how the deadly conditions that calcify animals also create a protected nursery for flamingos—death creating life.

6. B) Changes in volcanic activity or water chemistry could disrupt the delicate balance flamingos depend on

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. The passage shows flamingos depend on very specific conditions—the right alkalinity, the red algae for food, and predator-free zones. Any significant environmental change could disrupt this delicate ecosystem.

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

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 is deadly to most animals but essential for flamingos. Can you think of other examples in nature where something harmful to some creatures is helpful to others?
- The Maasai people consider Lake Natron sacred and keep their distance. How do cultural beliefs sometimes help protect dangerous natural places?
- If you were a scientist studying Lake Natron, what safety precautions would you need to take, and what questions would you most want to answer?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research pH levels and create a chart showing where Lake Natron falls compared to common substances like lemon juice, water, and bleach.
- Write a short story from the perspective of a flamingo chick being born at Lake Natron and learning to survive there.
- Design a travel warning poster for Lake Natron that explains both its dangers and its importance to flamingo conservation.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- National Geographic / Nick Brandt photography project