

An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

KidsPost — New Species

- News Article: This sea grass is REALLY old
- Discussion Questions: Really Old Sea Grass
- Map: Europe
- News Article and Discussion Questions: New animal species are found in Asia
- Map: Asia



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER-IN-RESIDENCE ERIC SALA

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KIDSPOST

This sea grass is REALLY old

A baby born in the United States today is expected to live to be 78½ years old.

That's a lot of birthday candles and may seem like a long time. But some things live to be much older. An Asian elephant is expected to live to be 86 years old, and a macaw, a kind of parrot, can live to 100.

But some whales live 200 years, and olive trees live from 500 to 900 years. The olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem are over 2,000 years old.

Maybe that's why scientists took notice earlier this month when an Australian researcher published a report identifying the oldest living thing on Earth. It's sea grass — grass growing

underwater — just off the coast of Spain that lives up to 200,000 years.

That means that this sea grass would have been alive at the same time as the first modern humans

According to the Smithsonian Institution's Human Origins program, modern humans, called *Homo sapiens*, which is Latin for "wise man," or "knowing man," originated in Africa and began spreading all over the world starting about 200,000 years ago.

Carlos Duarte, the professor at the University of Western Australia who made the sea grass discovery, said that the

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This sea grass, which is found off the coast of Spain in the Mediterranean Sea, has lived about 200,000

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previous oldest species on Earth was a plant from New Zealand that can live 43,000 years.

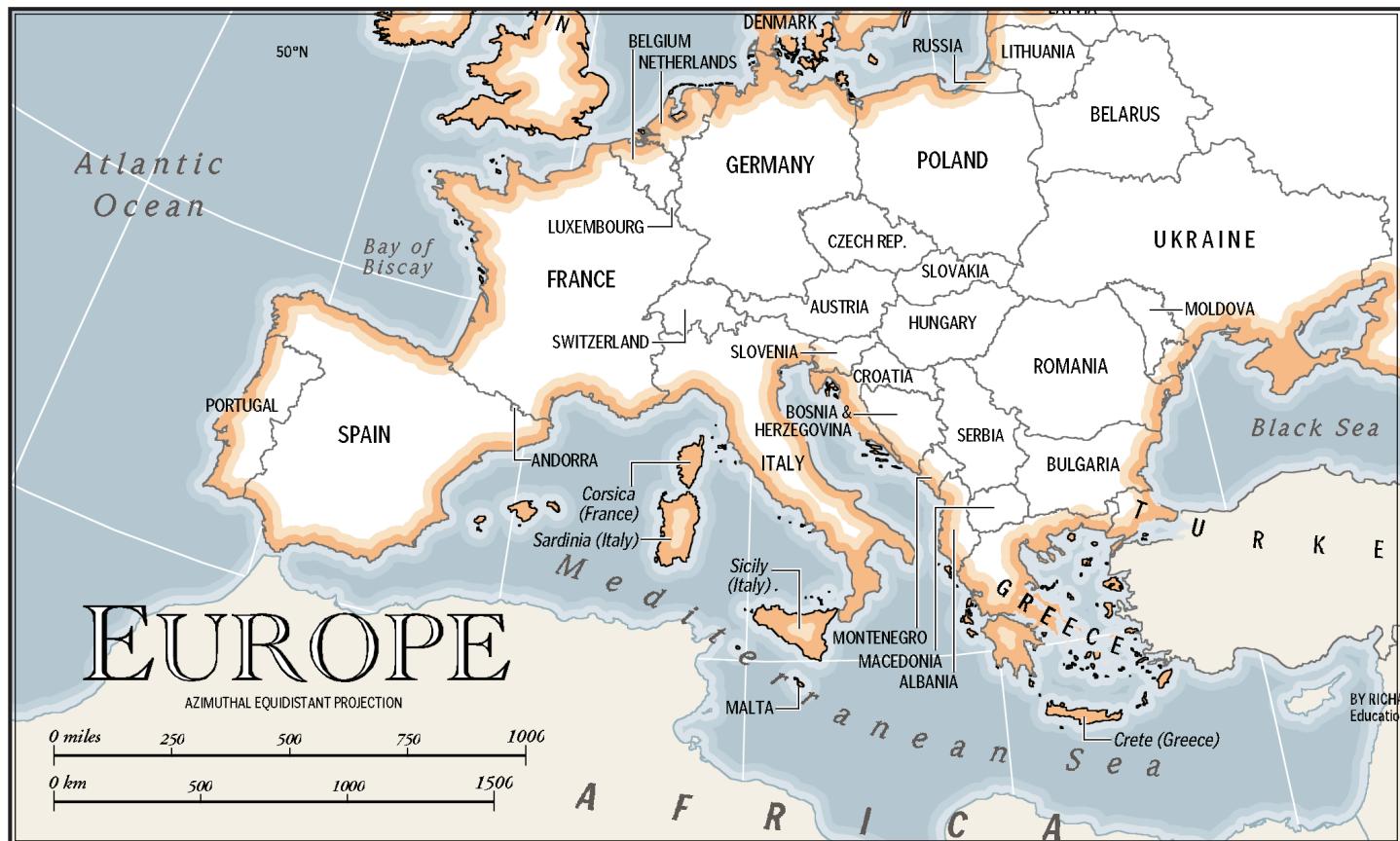
So how can scientists possibly know for sure that something is as old as 200,000 years? Duarte said the grass's age took a long time to calculate. Beginning in 2003, he and his team gathered underwater samples from across the Mediterranean Sea. They then began to study or "sequence" the plant's DNA, which is the most basic building block of all living things. By studying the DNA, they were able to determine the plants' age, Duarte explained.

The ancient sea grass is called *Posidonia oceanica*, and a single patch can stretch 10 miles and weigh more than 12,000 pounds. That's about as much as four Prius hybrid cars, and more than the average elephant, which weighs about 9,000 pounds.

"They run in underwater meadows from Spain on the western edge of the Mediterranean to Cyprus in the eastern part," Duarte said in a telephone interview. They renew themselves by a type of cloning (or copying), he said. But the original plant from all those years ago is still there. It's kind of like how your toenails keep growing and growing but are always part of the original, he said.

For Duarte, 51, who grew up in Spain and fell in love with the sea during family vacations, the excitement about the discovery is clouded by his realization that the effects of pollution and climate change may mean extinction for the great old plant. The amount of the sea grass has been shrinking about 5 percent a year for each of the past 20 years, Duarte said. The warming oceans are bad for the grasses but unlike animal species, plants can't migrate. "The outlook is very bad," Duarte said.

— Raymond M. Lane
February 17, 2012



Name _____ Date _____

Really Old Sea Grass



After you have read “This sea grass is REALLY old,” answer the following questions.

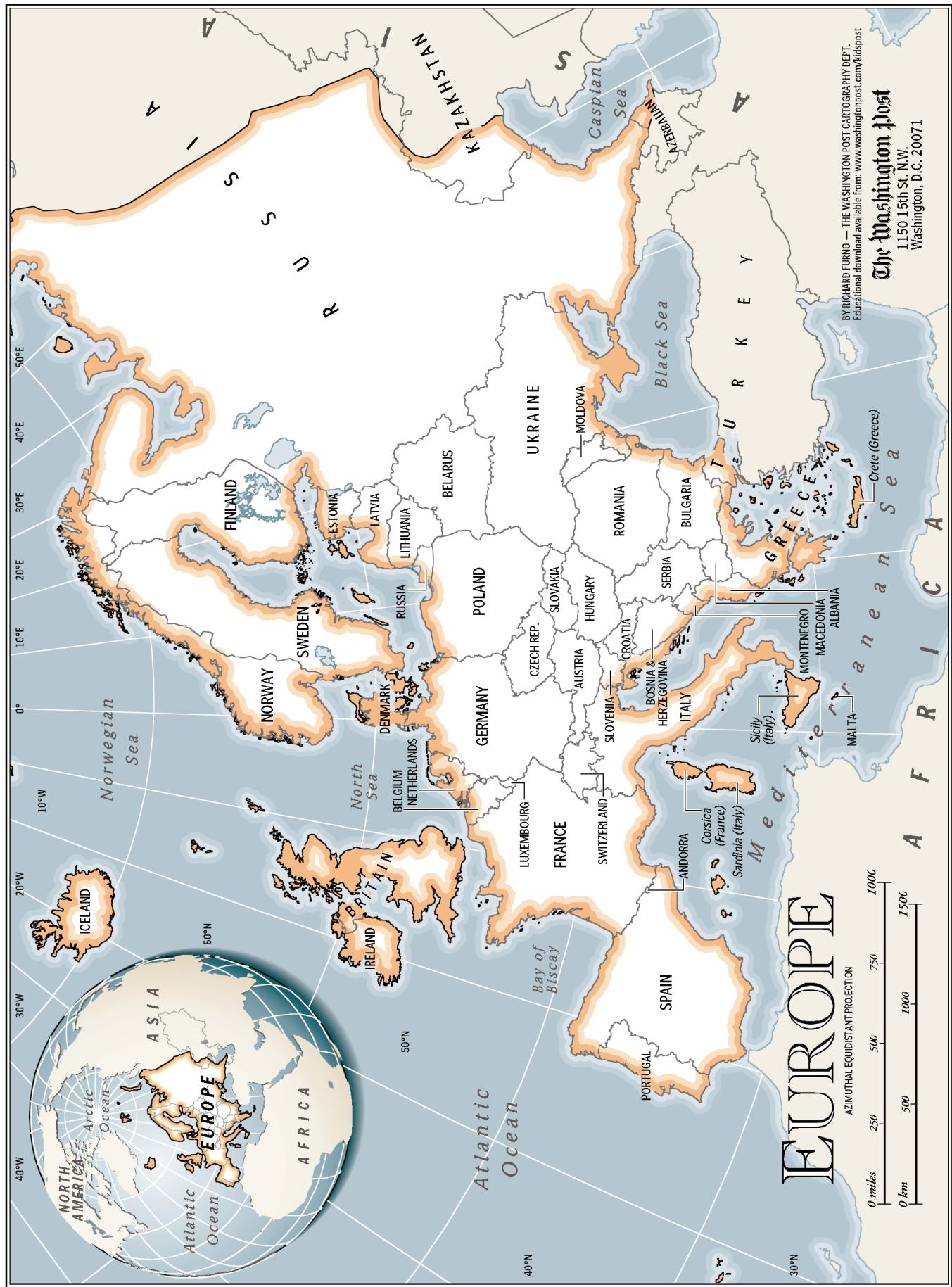
1. Life expectancy is the number of years that a plant or animal can be expected to live. Scientists believe a sea grass is the “oldest living thing on Earth.” How many years might it be expected to live?

2. Where is the sea grass found?

3. How did the scientists determine the age of the sea grass?

4. Find the comparison in the article. How does a comparison help readers to visualize the size of the sea grass?

5. In what ways do pollution and climate change affect the old sea grass?



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KIDSPOST

New animal species are found in Asia

Just in time for the new year, we have some new animals!

Scientists have identified a brightly colored gecko and a monkey with a funky hairdo as some of the more than 208 new species found in the Mekong River region of Southeast Asia.

Researchers for the World Wildlife Fund says the animals, whose discovery was announced last month, are from a region that is home to an incredible number of animals. The area is losing its forests and being developed, which leads to loss of habitats for the animals, scientists say.

The new species include a “psychedelic gecko” in southern Vietnam and a noseless monkey in a remote province of Burma that looks like it wears a pompadour.

The area is home to some of the world’s most endangered animals, including tigers, Asian elephants and Mekong dolphins, according to the WWF officials.

The Mekong flows through China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

— January 1, 2012



LEE GRISMER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Think About It



WORLD WILDLIFE FUND

Scientists continue to discover new species every year. Species are a major subdivision or grouping of a genus for identifying plants and animals. Read “New animal species are found in Asia.”

1. On the map locate the Mekong River, China, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia.
2. A habitat is the place or environment where a plant or animal naturally lives and grows. Give three reasons to protect forest areas.
3. Put symbols on the two countries where a “psychedelic gecko” and a noseless monkey were discovered.
4. What is an endangered animal?
5. Write a question you would like to ask about new animal species found in Southeast Asia.

