

There is probably no river in the world that means as much to the people who live along it than the Nile. From almost the beginning of history, the Egyptian people have lived near this river. Its waters help create a narrow band of green, fertile growth in the middle of a blistering hot, dry desert. Nothing grows, except where the river waters reach. For thousands of years, water from the Nile has fed Egypt's millions of people. Without the river, one of the world's oldest civilizations would not exist.



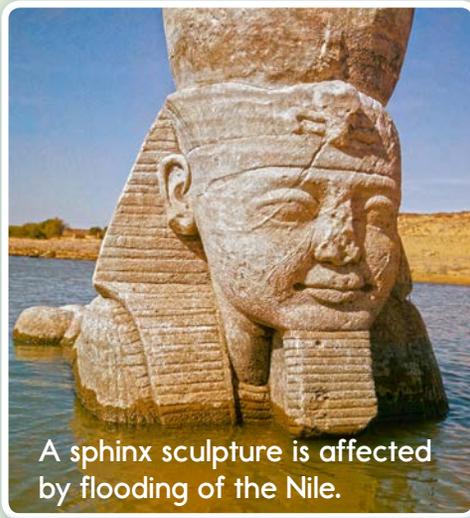
The Nile begins in the mountainous central African country of Burundi. It flows northward almost 4,160 miles (6,700 km). It is the longest river in the world and passes through nine more countries. At its mouth, on the Mediterranean Sea, its gigantic delta spreads out to a width of 150 miles (240 km). The Nile is actually formed by two rivers, the Blue Nile and the White Nile. They meet in Sudan, Egypt's neighbor to the south.

The river's name comes from a Greek word *neilos* meaning "valley." A photo from outer space shows why this is a very suitable name. The land along the river is green and lush. Only a short distance from the river banks, desert takes over. Extensive irrigation brings the life-giving river water to crop fields and thirsty animals and people. In fact, nineteen of every twenty Egyptians live within 12 miles (19 km) of the Nile.



The long history of civilization along the river emphasizes its importance to Egyptians. All of the famous monuments of ancient Egypt—the Sphinx, the pyramids, the temples—rise along the Nile. The ancient Egyptians worshipped the river as a god. They gave thanks each summer when melted snow from southern mountains made its way north. The gushing water flooded the Nile’s banks. It spread a thick layer of fertile black mud, where the Egyptians planted their food crops. Years without enough melted snow meant starvation and death for many. Too much rushing water caused deadly floods.

The Nile contributed much more than food to the ancient Egyptians. Along its banks grew a reed called papyrus. The Egyptians made paper out of *papyrus*—the word that gave us the English word *paper*. They even built boats from these reeds. The Nile also provided fish, shore birds,



A sphinx sculpture is affected by flooding of the Nile.

and other food. Finally, the highway it provided was the best way to travel through the kingdom and to the Mediterranean.

Today, Egyptians still depend on the Nile. It flows through the nation’s capital, Cairo. However, they have learned to control its moody temper. One of the world’s largest dams, the Aswan, was finished in 1970. It created the world’s third-largest reservoir, which fills with rainwater and snowmelt from the southern mountains. The water is released in controlled amounts to provide a steady water supply. The dam also produces huge amounts of hydropower. As with most dams, though, land and homes disappeared beneath the water when the reservoir was created.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The **Aswan Dam** traps the fertile silt of the river, which means Egyptian farmers must now use chemical fertilizers.

