

The River That Blinks

Thousands of insects, one rhythm, and a boatman who knows every tree on the bank.

8 min read

Before you read

- **synchronise** — to do something at the same time as others
- **mangrove** — a tree that grows in salty water along a river mouth or coast
- **colony** — a large group of animals or insects living together in one place
- **tidal** — rising and falling with the sea's tides
- **silt** — fine mud carried along by a river
- **habitat** — the place where a plant or animal naturally lives
- **generation** — all the members of a family or group born at about the same time



A sampan on the Selangor River at Kampung Kuantan. The lights in the trees are insects, not lamps.

¹ Pak Rahim pushes the sampan away from the jetty at eight o'clock and then stops rowing. The engine is off. It is always off. "They do not like the noise," he says, "and neither do I."

² For the next twenty minutes the boat drifts down the Selangor River while the bank beside it fills with light. The lights are kelip-kelip — fireflies. There are thousands of them in a single tree, and they are not flashing at random. They **synchronise**, all blinking together, so that the whole tree goes bright and dark, bright and dark, like something breathing.



Berembang leaves. The fireflies gather on one species and mostly ignore the rest.

³ Not every tree will do. The fireflies here gather on the berembang, a **mangrove** that grows where the river is still **tidal** and the water is half salt. Its leaves are the right shape for the insects to cling to, and the mud around its roots feeds the snails that young fireflies eat.

⁴ Pak Rahim has rowed this stretch for twenty-six years. He can name the trees that have gone quiet, and he remembers which ones his father used to row to.

⁵ The blinking is a signal. Male fireflies flash to attract females resting lower in the leaves, and flashing together makes the whole **colony** easier to notice than any single insect would be. A tree that pulses can be seen from far down the river. One insect alone would be lost against the dark.

⁶ An adult firefly lives for only a few weeks, and most of that life is spent looking for a mate. The larvae underneath, in the mud, take months to grow. So a tree that loses one **generation** does not simply refill the next evening. It can take a season, or longer, and sometimes it does not refill at all.

⁷ That is why the quiet rules on the river are stricter than they look. No engines near the trees. No torches, no camera flashes, no phone screens held up. Bright light drowns out the insects' own signalling, and a firefly that cannot be seen might as well not be flashing.

⁸ The bigger threats arrive more slowly. Farms upriver send **silt** and chemicals down with the water. New housing clears the bank, and a cleared bank means no berembang. When the **habitat** changes, the colony does not move next door; it thins out and goes.

⁹ At the end of the run Pak Rahim turns the sampan and rows back up against the current, which is the hard part of the evening. His passengers are usually silent by then. "People come for the lights," he says. "They go home thinking about the trees."

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. Why does Pak Rahim keep the engine switched off?
 - A The engine is broken
 - B Noise disturbs the fireflies
 - C The river is too shallow for it
 - D Rowing is faster against the current
2. Why do the fireflies gather on berembang trees in particular?
 - A They are the tallest trees on the bank
 - B The leaves suit the insects and the mud feeds the young
 - C They are the only trees left standing
 - D Their flowers glow at night
3. According to the passage, why do the males flash together rather than separately?
 - A It uses less energy
 - B It warns off birds
 - C A whole tree pulsing is far easier to see than one insect
 - D It keeps the colony warm
4. Why does losing one generation of fireflies matter so much?
 - A Adults live only weeks and the larvae take months to grow
 - B The adults cannot fly between trees
 - C Fireflies only breed once every twenty-six years
 - D The river floods every season
5. What does the passage suggest is the most serious long-term danger to the colony?
 - A Camera flashes from visitors
 - B Boats rowing too close to the bank
 - C Changes to the river and the clearing of the bank
 - D Snails eating the berembang leaves

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. Explain why a bright torch on the riverbank is a problem for a firefly, using what the passage says about signalling.

7. The passage gives two kinds of threat: the ones visitors cause and the ones that arrive from upriver. Explain the difference between them.

8. Pak Rahim says visitors “go home thinking about the trees”. What do you think he means, and why does he sound pleased about it?

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

9. Pak Rahim can name the trees that have gone quiet. Why do you think the writer included that detail instead of simply giving a number of lost trees? Use one fact from the passage to support your answer.

10. Some people argue that tourist boats should be banned from the river altogether to protect the fireflies. Others say the boats are what keep people caring. What do you think, and what in the passage supports your view?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — noise disturbs them | 2. B — suitable leaves and food in the mud | 3. C — a pulsing tree is easier to see | 4. A — short adult life, slow larvae | 5. C — habitat change from silt, chemicals and clearing

Part B

6. Fireflies communicate by light; a brighter light drowns out their flashes, so females cannot see the males signalling. Accept any answer showing the signal is lost, not just that the insects are frightened.

7. Visitor threats are immediate and local (noise, torches, flashes) and stop when the behaviour stops; upriver threats are slow and permanent (silt, chemicals, cleared banks) and destroy the habitat itself. Accept any answer separating short-term disturbance from lasting habitat loss.

8. He means visitors arrive for a spectacle but leave understanding that the insects depend on the berembang and the river. He sounds pleased because caring about the habitat is what protects the fireflies. Accept reasonable readings supported by the text.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

9. A strong answer notices that naming trees shows long personal knowledge and makes the loss specific rather than statistical, and links it to a fact (twenty-six years of rowing; his father rowed the same stretch). A weaker answer says only that it is sad. Prompt with: what does he know that a number cannot tell you?

10. Either position earns full credit if it uses the text. For banning: noise and light already have to be controlled, and habitat damage is worsening. Against banning: the quiet rules work, and Pak Rahim's point is that visitors leave caring about the trees. Mark the use of evidence and the handling of the other side.

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