

The River That Never Reaches the Sea

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Comprehension

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 20 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about six minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

Almost every great river ends in the sea. The Okavango ends in sand.

It begins as rain falling on the highlands of central Angola, gathers into a river called the Cubango, and runs south-east across a narrow strip of Namibia. Then it crosses into Botswana, hits the flat floor of the Kalahari, and stops behaving like a river at all. Instead of narrowing towards a mouth, it spreads — into a vast fan of channels, reed beds, lagoons and islands that swells and shrinks with the seasons.

The timing is the strangest part. The rain that fills the delta falls in Angola between December and March, and the water takes roughly four months to work its way downstream. It therefore arrives in Botswana in the middle of the dry winter. The delta is at its fullest in June and July, when the sky above it has been cloudless for weeks and the land beyond its edge is at its hardest and brownest.

Hardly any of that water leaves. Some evaporates straight off the surface, and a great deal more is drawn up through the roots of papyrus and reeds and breathed out through their leaves. Only a small fraction — about two parts in a hundred — flows onward at all, trickling out along rivers with names like the Thamalakane and the Boteti, towards Lake Ngami and the salt pans of the Makgadikgadi. The rest simply goes into the air and the sand.

Scattered across the wetland are thousands of islands, and a surprising number of them began as termite mounds. A mound of packed earth stands a little above the flood. Seeds dropped by birds take root on that dry crown, a palm or a fig grows, and its roots trap more sand and silt. Over centuries a hill of insect building becomes an island with trees on it. The largest, Chief's Island, lies along an old fault line in the rock beneath and is big enough to hold its own lion population.

The trees then do something odd to their own islands. Pulling water up through their roots, they leave behind the salts dissolved in it, year after year, until the centre of the

island becomes a pale crust where almost nothing will grow. Many islands are therefore ringed with green and blank in the middle.

People move through the shallows in a *mokoro*, a narrow canoe poled from a standing position at the stern. Traditionally these were hollowed from single trunks of sausage tree or ebony; most are now moulded in fibreglass, which spares the big trees and lasts considerably longer in the water.

In 2014 the Okavango Delta became the thousandth site on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Protecting it is unusually complicated, because nearly all of its water falls in a different country. Angola, Namibia and Botswana have shared a river commission since 1994, and every decision about dams, farms or boreholes upstream eventually shows up, four months later, in the reed beds of the Kalahari.

Cover the passage before you start.

Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

PART A Tell it back

Write down everything you can remember about where the Okavango's water comes from, when it arrives and where it goes. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

- 1 In which country does the Okavango's water begin as rain, and in which months is the delta at its fullest?

- 2 Why does the flood arrive in Botswana during the dry season rather than the wet one?

- 3 Why are many of the delta's islands green around the edges and bare in the middle?

- 4 The passage says the river “stops behaving like a river at all” once it reaches the Kalahari. What does it mean by that?

- 5 Why does the writer open with two short sentences about rivers ending in the sea and in sand?

- 6 Only about two per cent of the delta's water flows onward, and nearly all of it falls in another country. Weigh up what those two facts together mean for anyone trying to protect the Okavango.

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 • The rain falls on the highlands of central Angola. The delta is at its fullest in June and July.
- ☐ 2 • Because the rain falls far upstream in Angola between December and March, and the water needs about four months to travel down. By the time it spreads across the Kalahari, the local rainy season is over.
- ☐ 3 • The trees draw up water and leave the dissolved salts behind in the soil. Over many years the salt builds up at the centre of the island into a crust where almost nothing can grow, while the rim stays wetter and greener.
- ☐ 4 • A river normally runs in one channel and narrows towards a mouth. The Okavango does the opposite — it splits into many channels, reed beds and lagoons and never reaches a sea, so it fans out and disappears instead of flowing to an end.
- ☐ 5 • To set up the whole passage as an exception. Stating the ordinary rule in one line and breaking it in the next makes the delta's oddity immediate, and it tells the reader what the following paragraphs will explain: how a river can simply stop.
- ☐ 6 • Because so little water escapes, the delta depends almost entirely on what arrives from upstream rather than on anything stored or recycled locally — reduce the inflow and the wetland shrinks directly. Since that inflow is Angolan rain crossing Namibia, Botswana cannot protect the delta by its own laws alone, which is why a three-country commission exists. The strength of that arrangement is that it matches the problem; the weakness is the four-month delay, so damage upstream is already on its way before anyone downstream can see it.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Dual coding

Close the sheet and draw this passage as a rough map: the highlands at the top, the arrow running south-east, the fan spreading into the sand, a tiny trickle leaking out of the bottom. Label it from memory. Pairing a picture with the words gives your brain two separate routes back to the same information, so when one fails the other often still works.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Where do you already turn information into a sketch without being told to — a seating plan, a pitch, a route to a friend's house? What does drawing it give you that a list of words does not?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your teenager read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back and no prompting, because the effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, purpose and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.