Rivers of the World - Egypt

Cairo 2007 & 2008
The Ancient Egyptians called the river Ar or Aur which meant black because of the colour the sediment left on the landscape after the river’s annual flood. The name Nile, from neilos meaning river valley, was coined much later by the Greeks. The Nile measures 6,670km in length and is the longest river in the world. About 105 million people live along its river banks, most of these in Egypt. In fact, about 95% of Egypt’s present day population lives within 15km of the river.

Most people associate the Nile with Egypt, but only 22% of the river’s course actually goes through that country. The Nile also runs through Sudan, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Uganda and Burundi. The Nile’s significance to the whole of Africa cannot be overestimated since it drains about 10% of the continent’s land area. Zaire, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda all have tributaries which flow into the Nile or into Lake Victoria.

The Nile in Egypt is made up of water from two principal sources: the Blue Nile provides 60% of the waters that reach Egypt and the White Nile provides 14%. The balance is provided by two tributaries, the Sobat and the Atbara. The Blue Nile and the White Nile meet at the Sudanese capital city of Khartoum.
The Nile is a staging post on the migratory corridor between Europe and Africa, and so every year the Egyptians witness the arrival and departure of flocks of birds in their thousands. There are over 300 species of bird to be found along the Nile in Egypt. The ibis was considered a sacred bird by the ancient Egyptians. On temple walls, the Egyptian god Thoth, god of wisdom and writing, is depicted with the head of an ibis. In Ancient Egyptian times, elephants, rhinos, hippos, lions, hyenas and giraffes roamed the valley although these were gradually hunted and pushed out as civilisation grew. However, Nile crocodiles still survive. The Nile crocodile is one of the largest of all the world’s crocodiles. At nearly six metres in length and weighing in at 700kg it is a fearsome predator. The word crocodile means ‘lizard of the Nile’ and the Ancient Egyptians considered them to be so sacred that sanctuaries were built to honour them and when they died they were mumified. At a temple complex called Crocodilopolis, the sacred beasts were fed with roast meats. By the twentieth century, of the great creatures, only crocodiles remained in Egyptian waters and now sadly they are gone too. The construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s pushed the crocodile south into Sudan.
Though Egypt is dependent on the Nile for 98% of its water needs, the nation has fouled the river with untreated municipal and industrial wastes and agricultural chemicals. From the Aswan High Dam north to the Mediterranean Sea, the Nile's waters are used again and again by each village and town and by every farmer's field. Before it even gets to Cairo, the river is laden with pollution and carrying so much salt leached from croplands that the water must be desalinated before it can be used for agricultural and municipal purposes further downstream. Cairo suffers from water pollution as the sewer system tends to fail and overflow. On occasion, sewage has escaped onto the streets to create a health hazard. This problem is hoped to be solved by a new sewer system funded by the European Union, which could cope with the demands of the city. The dangerously high levels of mercury in the city's water system has alarmed global health officials who are concerned over related health risks.
More than 85% of the Nile’s water originates in Ethiopia yet the vast majority of the Nile’s flow is used by Egypt, the last nation on the Nile’s path to the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile provides almost all the fresh water used by more than 60 million Egyptians living along its banks. In the past, Egypt saw no reason to worry about its dependence on the Nile’s waters. However, upstream nations are starting to harness the Nile to provide economic prosperity for their own growing numbers and that is causing Egypt some concern.

It is expected that the population of the Nile basin, which was about 160 million in 1990, will grow to 300 million by 2010 and 550 million by 2030.

Reliable access to water remains key to increasing agricultural productivity, providing employment, and raising the standards of living of the people who live in the ten countries along the Nile. On the other hand, the Nile also represents a vast resource for hydropower generation. Competing projects combined with the impacts of climate change could send the region’s over-tapped water resources into crisis. In a historic effort, on 22 February 1999, the ten countries of the Nile basin adopted a shared vision for sustainable development – the Nile Basin Initiative.
The felucca (an Italian term applied loosely to any kind of pleasure boat) was the most common boat on the Nile. The feluccas seen today were invented in 3350 BC. The light-hulled boats are generally long and very narrow and were usually sailed, although they can also be rowed when the wind is not favourable. These days, feluccas are most commonly used in the tourist trade.

Solar Boats were high status, regal vessels built in the image of the boat that took the Sun God Ra across the heavens. Historians knew of these vessels only via hieroglyphic references until 1954 when archaeologists discovered the components of a Solar Boat in a regal tomb. The reconstructed boat is now housed in its own museum near the Great Pyramid at Giza. It is 44m long and 5.9m wide. The hull is made of boards stitched together with twisted hemp and leather thongs that shrank in contact with water. There was provision for just six pairs of oars and as this would not have provided much propulsion, these oars might have been used for steering and the boat either towed or pulled along by ropes. Early sails resembled venetian blinds made of papyrus, but more suitable materials were soon found and sails became works of art painted in rich colours and embroidered with the emblem of the king’s soul.
Today, in Cairo’s city centre, there is very little public access to the Nile waterfront. Busy roads line most of the riverside edges. The roadways are constructed some 10 to 15m from the river itself leaving an exposed strip of land between road and river. This riverbank area is generally left unlandscaped and vegetation is allowed to grow unconstrained. There is no public access here, although some of Cairo’s poor and homeless squat the land. Other parts of this exposed strip have been developed with restaurants and discoteques.

Very few people walk along the pavements beside the river. Perhaps because of the noise and pollution of the roadways, perhaps because these roadways are very difficult to cross! Perhaps also because even on the pavement, pedestrians are cut off from the river itself. Strolling over the Nile bridges is however a very popular pastime. In particular, on a Friday afternoon after work, people bring foldaway chairs and picnics and sit looking out at the Nile through the sunset and often well into the night. A rare exception on the Nile waterfront which integrates access to the waterfront is located between Kasr El Nil Bridge and 6 October Bridge in the north. This project has strengthened the embankment, designing stepped terraces, parks and public spaces by the river. The southern portion of the site is a 200m long park called the Al-Riyadi Garden, meaning ‘the initial’. The garden is a successful model for allowing the public to access the riverfront.
Geoff Smith (left) leading the artists’ briefing session
El Malek Fahd Experimental School

El Malek Fahd Experimental School was partnered with Norbury Manor Business and Enterprise College for Girls in Thornton Heath in LB Croydon
We learned how to be more confident and helpful to each other and how to conceive our ideas and we got a lot of support from our teachers and of course from Mr Philip and I really think it was a good way to practise my English well. So as you see there were a lot of benefits for us. I hope I can join this magnificent project again next year.

Doaa Aly, El Malek School
Sarah Hassan, Heba Rafea & Reem Morsi (2007)  
River of Life

Studying ‘River of Life’, the pupils researched plants and animals that live on and around the river. They made drawings and paintings which were collaged together to create their final composition.

Kate el Rigby & Philip Arneill (2008)  
Working River

Painting on black tissue paper with household bleach, students chose to focus mostly on the ancient history of the Nile to explore their ‘Working River’ theme.
International School of Chouiefat
Sarah Hassan, Heba Rafea & Reem Morsi
(2007)
River Culture

Key words and phrases were woven together using the rich traditional language of calligraphy and Arabic script. These words were manipulated and overlaid in Photoshop to create a patterned effect on their final design.
British International School
Cairo

British International School was partnered with The London Nautical School in LB Lambeth
At the beginning I’d like to say that it was a great experience for everyone in our group and especially for me. We had a lot of fun drawing and painting in this project. We tried to show the great civilization of ancient Egypt and how they lived on the river and how their life was.
Sarah Hassan, Heba Rafea & Reem Morsy (2007)
Resourceful River

Investigating ‘Resourceful River’ as their theme, the pupils researched trade and commerce. They made drawings and paintings which were scanned into the computer and arranged onto their board.

Kate El Rigby & Philip Arneill (2008)
River Culture

The pupils made sculptures from clay, sand and other materials.
El Salam Experimental School was partnered with Sir John Cass Foundation School in Stepney in LB Tower Hamlets
Sarah Hassan, Heba Rafea & Reem Morsi (2007)
River of Life

Researching ‘River of Life’, the pupils looked at wildlife associated with their river and its surroundings. They made drawings and stencils which were then integrated into the final design.

Kate el Rigby & Philip Arneill (2008)
River City

Having taken photographed Cairo, their own ‘River City’, students then manipulated A4 monochrome and colour prints of their photos using acrylic and poster paints.
Futures Experimental School was partnered with St Paul's Way Trust School in LB Tower Hamlets
Sarah Hassan, Heba Rafea & Reem Morsi (2007) River City

The pupils discussed the landscape and architecture of Cairo and the River Nile. They made pastel drawings and took junk wood and boxes, collected from the city’s streets, to sculpt a free standing structure. This was photographed with the pastel drawings behind it.

Kate el Rigby & Philip Arneill (2008) Resourceful River

Students first coloured small pieces of paper and foam with paint, then they collectively created a mosaic showing a Nile River scene.
Sarah Hassan, Heba Rafea & Reem Morsi (2007) River of Life

Investigating ‘River of Life’, the pupils made paintings depicting animal life. They then cut out their paintings and arranged them onto their panel.
Mostafa Kamel Experimental Language School was partnered with Kidbrooke School (now called Corelli College) in RB Greenwich
Kate el Rigby & Philip Arneill (2008)
Polluted River

For ‘Polluted River’ students created a collaged relief map of the Nile using discarded, potentially recyclable materials which they had collected. The water of the river was formed by writing the Arabic word for ‘pollution’ repeatedly.
Hassan Abu Bakr Experimental School was partnered with La Sainte Union Convent School in Highgate in LB Camden
Kate el Rigby & Philip Arneill (2007)
River of Life

Working on the theme ‘River of Life’, students drew and decorated Nile River animals in coloured pens and pencils, and arranged them into a final collage.
Rivers of the World
'Art from Schools Around the World'
From 13 to 21 December 2007
El Gezirah Park, Zamalek

Nile, Ganges, Yangtze, Liesbeek, Thames

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