

# Unit 5: Great rivers

## A Reading

### 1 Read the article below.

#### Passage A: Amazon facts

What makes the Amazon the greatest river in the world is the volume of water that it carries; it **produces** 20% of the world's river water. Although the Nile river in Africa is the longest river in the world (at 6 650 kilometres long to the Amazon's approximate 6 280 kilometres), the Nile does not carry a 60th of the amount of water that the Amazon does, because the latter river drains the entire northern half of the South American continent. The torrential tropical rains deluge the rainforests with over 10 metres a year, and rainfall in the region is a near daily **occurrence**. The Amazon is also the world's widest river (6–10 kilometres), and the mouth of the Amazon, where it meets the sea, is so **deep** as well as wide that ocean-going ships have navigated its waters far inland. It becomes even wider when it floods in the wet season.

The precise source of the Amazon was only recently discovered, although the **origins** of most of the Earth's great rivers have been known for some time, and the quest to find the Amazon's origin in the most inaccessible part of the world had intrigued **explorers** for centuries. Determining the source of the Amazon has been so difficult because of a combination of unfriendly terrain, high altitudes, cold winds and the large number of potential headwater streams that

needed to be investigated. What defines a river's origin is the most distant point from the mouth (as **measured** along the river's course and not by the way the crow flies) from which water flows year round along the main trunk of the river, not including the tributaries.

In 2001, a 22-member international team of mappers and explorers, **sponsored** by the National Geographic Society, claimed to have pin-pointed the source of the Amazon river. The team explored five different headwater streams in the Andes before they were **convinced** that they had **definitely** discovered the place where drops of water first collect to form the mighty Amazon. According to the team, the Amazon's origin is a small mountain stream that flows from the sides of Nevado Mismi, a 5 600-metre mountain in southern Peru. A global positioning system (GPS), linked to a network of satellites, was employed to precisely locate the source, which is less than 160 kilometres from the Pacific Ocean

Famously, the Amazon river is home to many exotic and **extreme** tropical creatures, such as catfish, anaconda (biggest snake) and piranha (most ferocious fish), as well as the macaws and tapirs that add their colours and sounds to the jungle.





## D Reading

6 Read the article below.

### Passage B: Life and death on the Nile

For Egyptians, farmers and fishermen, the Nile is not just a beautiful view, it is a gift, without which there could be no Egypt, only a scorched wasteland. In a country that does not receive much rainfall, the river is their livelihood. It covers only 4% of the country but its banks are where almost all of the 67 million Egyptians live. The Nile irrigates corn crops and citrus orchards, and provides water for herds of cows and for doing the laundry. Its seasons are the rhythms of the Egyptian way of life; when it floods every July, locals move to higher ground until it subsides three months later.

The waters of the Nile flow for nearly 7 000 kilometres, from the jungles of Uganda through the deserts of Sudan to arrive at Cairo, Africa's largest city. For centuries no one knew where it began, and the whereabouts of its source was a legend and a quest – a dangerous one, as the Nile contains crocodiles and intruders into the heart of Africa were often not welcomed by the native population. The source was finally discovered in the mid-19th century.

The world's longest river is a personality in myth as well as in reality. It features in many memorable scenes in the Bible and in literature, ancient and modern. It was assigned to the god Isis, to be honoured with

offerings of food, and it was believed that the pharaohs could control it through their magical powers. The pyramids could not have been built without the means of transport provided by the great river.

Local stories tell of mythical creatures, some half-human and half-fish, which inhabit the river and sometimes take a fancy to humans and take them to live at the bottom; and of others which own the river and must be fed and kept happy or they will cause harm. The Egyptian queen Cleopatra was nicknamed the Serpent of Old Nile, and it was believed that the river mud had creative powers and produced snakes. Many films and books have used the romantic and threatening setting of the river, including the famous Agatha Christie detective novel *Death on the Nile*.

Since the advent of cruise liners and the influx of tourists, however, life on the riverbank has changed, and Egyptians say that the Nile is no longer theirs. Although it is, in fact, chemical fertilisers that are largely responsible, local opinion is that the leisure boats have polluted the water. They watch as the great city of Cairo continues to spread its garish hotels and grey apartment blocks along the banks in a ribbon development that shows no signs of stopping.

7 Read the extract below from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

### Passage C

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the

channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect.