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Student Materials

Grade 6 | Benchmark Assessment

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Hello Hong Kong

► Warm air means a change in the weather, and summer means travel to many families. For the Chen family, this summer was going to be an exciting time of year. For the first time, they would take the underground train ride from their home in southern China and travel to Hong Kong.

Jackie was very excited about the visit. Jackie Chan, the movie star, was one of his heroes, and he liked to imagine that one day he would meet the famous star from Hong Kong. They would become good friends, smiling and laughing that their names were almost the same.

The family had spent much time learning about Hong Kong. Still, they were surprised at what they found when they got off the train and walked onto the city streets. Old Chinese ways blended with new Western culture, the result of British rule of the island for hundreds of years. The city was totally bilingual. Almost everyone spoke fluently in English and Chinese. Tall buses with two levels of seats whizzed through the busy streets, competing with trams and taxis for passengers. Modern skyscrapers filled the city, and millions of people bustled about their business and their lives. There were cars, but they certainly weren't necessary with all the public transportation readily available.

Rising high beyond the city skyline were steep, green mountains, and much of the island was preserved for parks. However, the family was only treated to the full beauty of Hong Kong Island when they took a ferry ride across Victoria Harbour. From the water, the family could see almost the entire island, including the mountains.

The Chens had a wonderful time exploring the city, shopping and visiting museums. They loved hiking up peaceful, green trails to look out over the island that was part of their homeland. Jackie knew he would return many times. There was so much to see and do that his imagination was set on fire. Maybe someday he would get to meet his hero. In Hong Kong, everything seemed possible.

Ocean Harvest

► Many different organisms live in the salty water of the world's oceans, and one of the most useful and nutritious is seaweed. There are thousands of species of seaweed that grow in different shapes and colors. Seaweed grows in small bunches or in vast underwater forests and attaches itself to objects or to the ocean floor. Seaweed absorbs nutrients from the water, and, like other plants, it makes its own food. Also like other plants, it needs sunshine to produce its food, so it grows mainly in shallow water. A single plant can be very short or as long as three hundred feet.

In nature, seaweed provides a safe habitat and food for many different sea animals. It is an important part of the ocean's food chain, because seaweed is rich in the vitamins and minerals that are necessary for many creatures.

Seaweed is widely used in Asian countries, where it is plentiful because so much of Asia is surrounded by seas. It can be grown and harvested like land crops, a practice that is known as aquaculture. Seaweed aquaculture is a major industry in Japan and China. The harvest is used for many kinds of products, from fertilizer to food. Much of the seaweed is used for human food, and it is an important part of many people's diets even though you may not realize it. No seaweed is poisonous, and some is even considered a rare treat. The Japanese, in particular, use this "sea vegetable" in many of their daily meals. Seaweed is an ingredient in some kinds of yogurt that are sold not only in Asia but also in the United States.

Around the world, seaweed is also used in beauty aids such as soaps and skin lotions. In fact, you may be using seaweed without knowing it. Seaweed is often an ingredient in your toothpaste.

As you can see, there are numerous ways to use seaweed. If you have never tried it, you might consider ordering a seaweed dish at a restaurant someday.

River of Grass

► Many people think of the Florida Everglades as a huge swamp, but it's actually a wide river dense with saw grass. Unlike ordinary grass, saw grass grows up to ten or fifteen feet tall and is sharp as a razor. The slow moving water of the Everglades flows for a hundred miles from a lake to the ocean.

In some places, the water is only a few inches deep; in other places there are deep pools. The mud in the river is a kind of quicksand that can swallow a person or stall a boat. Small islands called hammocks dot the river. Native Americans once made their homes on the hammocks.

Abundant birds such as egrets, great blue herons, and spoonbills live in this region. Wildlife you might see on a visit there include bobcats, raccoons, alligators, and even a rare type of panther. Don't forget to watch out for dangerous snakes such as water moccasins and rattlesnakes!

There are wet and dry seasons in the Everglades. Water levels drop during the dry season, from December to April, and much of the wildlife migrates to areas with deeper pools of water. With the beginning of the wet season, the wildlife once again scatters over a wide area.

Like many other natural areas on earth, the Everglades is threatened by civilization. Even though part of this region is a national park, pollutants from farms and cities have entered the water. The natural movement of the river has been interrupted by the dams that were built to control water flow. Encroaching towns disturb the land and animals.

Those who treasure the Everglades ecology know the importance of protecting its land, water, and animals. They are working to find solutions to the problems that threaten the region. We hope it's not too late to save the river of grass.

Acting

► In the lifestyle section of the newspaper was a brief notice from the local community theater. “Open auditions!” it read. “Roles for two women ages eighteen to twenty-four, one man over age fifty, and a girl between the age of ten and thirteen.”

Mariko, age twelve, read the blurb aloud to her mother. “It sounds like a good opportunity,” her mother said, “and I know you’d enjoy performing in a play again.” Mariko grinned. Since first grade, she had written and acted in plays with other friends in the neighborhood.

Mariko wanted the part, but she was worried it might be too much trouble for everyone. Someone would have to take her and pick her up from rehearsals. She would need to invest time learning her lines, and she would need help memorizing the script. She mentioned all this to her mother. “Do you really think it will work?” she asked.

Her mother smiled and said, “I really think this could be a wonderful opportunity for you. If you want to pursue it, we’ll find a way to manage all the details.”

Mariko hugged her mother and then scanned the notice for the phone number. She called immediately and got information about how to apply and where to pick up a copy of the script. After walking to the theater to pick up the script and schedule an audition, she raced home, eager to begin practicing. She read through the entire script, and by the final epilogue, Mariko was convinced she could play the part.

Every evening for a week, Mariko finished her homework early and then spent an hour reading and rehearsing different ways of expressing the words and feelings of the character in the play. When her mother had time, she helped with suggestions. By the date of the audition, Mariko had already begun memorizing many of her character’s lines. She was prepared and confident, and she could tell that she had impressed the director.

A week later, Mariko learned she had received the part! She couldn’t wait for the rehearsals to begin.

The Mariana Trench

► Just as there is a highest point on our planet, there is also a lowest point. Mount Everest is the highest, and the lowest is the Mariana Trench. This deep slice in the ocean floor is also the deepest part of the ocean. It is found off the coast of the Mariana Islands, near Japan. The deepest point of this trench is Challenger Deep, named for the British ship that discovered it. The trench is nearly seven thousand feet deeper than Mount Everest is high.

The water deep in the trench is frigid and dark because sunlight cannot go deeper than about five hundred feet. As light decreases, pressure increases. Surprisingly, the floor of the trench is dotted with hydrothermal vents, which are openings in the ocean floor through which boiling hot water flows. Although plants and animals on land cannot live in such an extreme environment and need sunlight for life, there is an abundance of life in the ocean depths. Most of the life forms are very tiny organisms, but there are also communities of larger species, such as mussels and crabs, that live near the hydrothermal vents. One of the most unusual animals is the tubeworm, a white worm that can grow up to three feet long.

Tubeworms were unknown organisms until people began to explore the deep ocean and discovered hot vents and the life forms that live near them. This strange worm has no eyes and no mouth. Bacteria inside the worm convert chemicals from the hot vents into food for the worm. Tubeworms in turn provide a food source for other animals forming a complex food chain.

Exploration of the deepest part of the Earth is important to science and knowledge. Scientists can learn a great deal about how life began on Earth by discovering and investigating life forms that have existed unchanged for millions of years, like those living in the Mariana Trench.

A Delicious Tradition

► One of the world's most-loved flavors starts with small seeds found inside pods that grow on rainforest trees. Nearly two thousand years ago, the Mayan people of Central America discovered the unique properties of this seed. The pods grow on cacao trees, and the seeds can be made into the delicious treat we call chocolate.

The Maya ground up the beans and used the powder to make highly prized drinks. They did not have sugar, so the chocolate that the Maya made was very bitter. They spiced up the beverages with various other things, such as cornmeal and chili peppers. Later, the bean was discovered by the Aztecs, who loved it so much that they used the seeds as a form of money. For the Aztecs, chocolate was an important part of both their everyday lives and their celebrations.

After the Spanish crossed the ocean to the Americas, they took the seeds back with them to Spain. People began to sweeten the cacao with sugar and cinnamon. The seeds were so expensive that drinking chocolate became a sign of wealth. Still, demand for chocolate quickly spread through Europe. At this time, the chocolate was still too gritty and oily to be used in anything but drinks.

It wasn't until a new type of mill was invented that the beans could be ground into a much smoother paste. Chocolate could then be made into solid bars. Another inventor created a cocoa press that removed the oils from the seeds and left a fine powder, called cocoa, behind. This powder could be added to foods such as cakes. New machines allowed different forms of chocolate to be made, and today we can pick from a wide variety of chocolate flavors and items.

Chocolate has come a long way in its journey through the world. What was once reserved for royalty has become a favorite among people everywhere.

Sea of Salt

► Imagine a body of water in which animals and plants cannot live. Imagine a body of water that is so buoyant that a person cannot sink in it. Now imagine people being able to sit upright and read a newspaper while floating on that same body of water. There is such an unusual place, and it is called the Dead Sea.

This inland sea lies at the lowest point on earth, in a desert valley far below sea level. The nations of Israel and Jordan are next to the Dead Sea. The Jordan River flows into it, but there is no outlet, so evaporation is the only way that water escapes. When the water evaporates, it leaves behind heavy salts and minerals that prevent plants and animals from living in the sea. The Dead Sea is a very salty sea, nearly nine times saltier than the ocean.

Although the sea supports no life, people flock to its shores. The salty water stings people's skin and eyes. Still, many people believe that the minerals in the water and surrounding mud have an amazing ability to help cure sicknesses and ailments. The humidity is low, and the air is free from pollen, so people with breathing problems find relief near the Dead Sea.

The sea that is already dead is shrinking as irrigation waters are pulled from the Jordan River, reducing its flow into the Dead Sea. The sea is becoming smaller and even more saline. This ancient sea is an important part of the region's long history, and people are concerned that it may disappear altogether. However, there are no easy solutions for saving the Dead Sea. Some scientists want people to allow more water from the Jordan River to flow into the sea. Others have suggested connecting the Dead Sea with the Red Sea. Time will tell whether or not the Dead Sea disappears completely, leaving nothing but a barren valley.

Another World

► Out in the water, tubes of seaweed swayed in the gentle swells. The sun reflected flashes of bright light on the water's surface, while on the beach a dozen friends were busy preparing their gear. Victoria's cousin Hector was among them. As Victoria walked up to the group, she could feel their excitement.

Some of the divers were putting on their facemasks, snorkels, and flippers. Others added belts loaded with heavy weights. Hector explained that the extra weight helped their buoyant bodies stay underwater. Hector and his friends were preparing to go free diving. In free diving, swimmers hold their breath as long as possible and dive as deep as possible. Hector explained that when you are free diving you do not carry air tanks or oxygen as you do when scuba diving. He emphasized that it was very important to be properly trained before attempting any kind of diving.

Victoria said, "I want to learn to free dive. Will you please teach me?"

Hector agreed to give her a preliminary lesson, and he borrowed his sister's diving equipment. His sister was about Victoria's size, so her facemask and fins would fit snugly but comfortably. "Today we will stay in shallow water," said Hector. "I'll accompany you throughout, so you don't have to be anxious about diving too deep and running out of breath."

Hector showed her how to fit the face mask over her eyes and nose and how to clear the mask when it flooded. It was up to Victoria to practice holding her breath as long as she could.

They moved into slightly deeper water so Victoria could practice kicking with her flippers to propel herself into the depths and then return to the surface. Even in the shallow water, Victoria glimpsed the magic of the underwater world, full of brightly colored fish and strange sea creatures. She could hardly wait until she could go out farther with Hector and continue exploring the sea.

The Barefoot Runner

► When the Summer Olympic Games were held in Rome, Italy, the marathon was won in a most unusual way. As was usual, the final event for track and field was the marathon race. What was not usual was that Abebe Bikila ran the race barefoot, and won. That day, Bikila became the first person from East Africa to win an Olympic gold medal.

Bikila was born in Ethiopia in 1932. He spent his early years going to school and taking care of his family's sheep. When he got older, he worked for several years as a bodyguard with the government. While watching a parade, he noticed a group of athletes wearing shirts with "Ethiopia" on the back. When he learned they represented his country in the Olympic Games, he decided to become one of them.

When Bikila qualified to be in the Olympics, he had run only two marathons in his life, both in his home country. The world had not yet heard of this remarkable runner. However, he became a well-known hero after easily winning the marathon in world record time. Even more amazing than his win was that he ran the entire race barefoot. He said he found his shoes and socks uncomfortable, so he chose to run without them.

Bikila had to have his appendix removed shortly before the next Olympics in Tokyo, Japan. Although he had not fully recovered from the operation, he raced again, this time in shoes. He again easily won the marathon by the largest margin in history. A great runner from Australia called Bikila's win "the greatest performance ever in track and field."

Bikila had become the first runner to win the Olympic marathon twice in a row. Throughout his career, he ran fifteen marathons and won twelve. Abebe Bikila is now remembered as being one of the best runners in the world.
