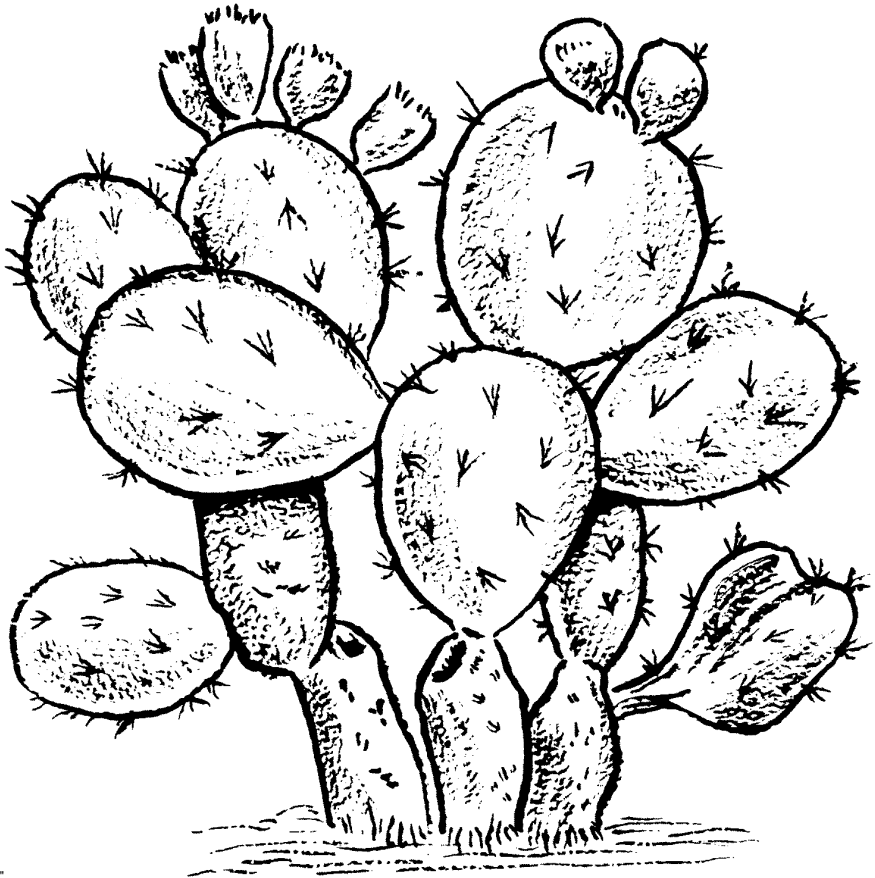


Literacy International: Deserts



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English

Environment

Literacy International: Deserts

Part of a Geography series including

Forests

Deserts

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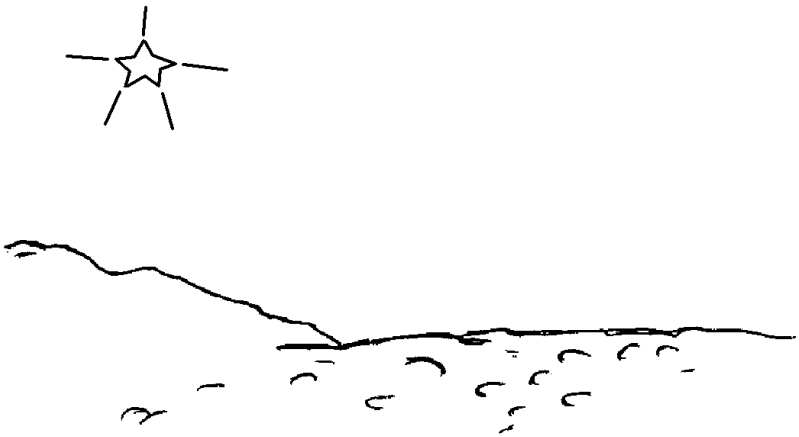
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WHAT IS A DESERT?

There are many different kinds of land on the earth. Two of these are deserts and forests.

A desert is a very dry area. It has less than 50 centimeters of rain in a year. Deserts can be hard places to live in - not like forests or plains. Abraham, Jesus and Mohammed started three great religions of our world. They lived in deserts.

Not as many plants can grow in a desert as in other places, because there is not enough water to keep them alive.



Most deserts are hot. The temperature may go from very hot at midday to very cold at night. The reason the temperature changes so much is that there isn't enough moisture, or humidity (wetness) to block the rays of the sun.

Even when there is rain, the rain may evaporate before it reaches the ground. That is, it may turn from liquid to vapor, like air. Or it may dry up soon after it hits the ground. The sun shines on the earth and takes away any moisture that is there. So the ground gets dry, hot and hard. There isn't enough moisture to cool it.

Some deserts are cooler. But they are still dry.

When they think of deserts, many people think of sand. But not all deserts have sand. Some have gravel, rocky hills, or long low dry places where rivers used to be.

WHERE ARE THE DESERTS OF THE WORLD?

The biggest desert in the world is the Sahara Desert in north Africa. It covers three and a half million square miles. The Arabian Desert in Saudi Arabia, the western Australian Desert, and the Gobi Desert in Mongolia and China, are also very large.



Pictured Above: The Sahara Desert

The Kalihari Desert is in South Africa and Botswana, the Namib Desert is in Namibia, and the Mojave Desert is in California in the United States.

South America has two important deserts: the Patagonian on its southeast coast and the Atacama on the west coast. The Atacama is very long and narrow. It runs through Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile, and is one of the driest places in the world.

Most deserts are near the Equator, but there are also deserts in northeast India and in parts of Europe. Even a polar region can have a desert. There is a desert in Antarctica and another in Greenland, but they are covered with snow. Under the snow, the land far down is dry.

We find deserts on all seven continents. About one-fifth of the land on the earth is desert.

PLANTS OF THE DESERT

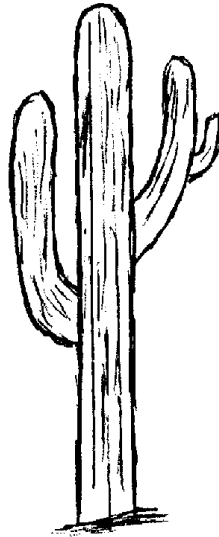
Only a few plants can grow in a desert. To grow there, a plant must be able to get along with very little water. Some deserts have very few plants, and they are far apart. Or there may be no plants at all. So a desert can look like a big empty place. A large part of Arabia is called "The Empty Quarter."

Some desert plants can take in water from the rain and use it later. Some have very small leaves so that they don't need much water. Some have deep roots to reach water far under the ground. Or their roots may spread far out on top of the ground to find water.

Some desert plants have thick or wax-coated leaves to keep water inside them. Some drop their leaves in the driest time so they will not lose much water. Other plants have silvery or shiny leaves that reflect the energy of the sun.

That means the light and heat from the sun will bounce off and the plant will not dry up so quickly.

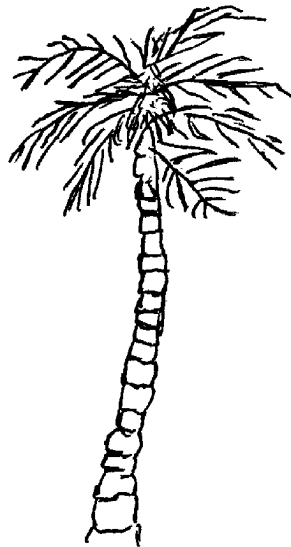
There are even a few plants that become dormant for part of every year, when it is the hottest. That means they seem to go to sleep, and they stop growing and dry out above the ground. But the parts of the plant under the ground do not get so hot and still have water. Then when it gets a little cooler, the part above the ground can grow again.



One kind of plant we find in the desert is the cactus. The cactus can stay alive with very little water. The saguaro cactus has ribs, or pieces of flesh that stick out in long rows. During a rain these ribs take in water and get bigger. They hold the water until the plant needs it, and slowly get smaller again as the plant uses it up. The barrel cactus does the same thing. Thirsty animals may want to eat part of the plant to get the water. A cactus has sharp prickles to keep them away.

Prickly pear cactus, sage, deer grass and wheat grass are other plants that grow well in a desert. The desert in Mexico has barrel cactus and saltbush.

In certain places deserts have enough water for trees to grow. We may see palm trees, palo verde trees, ponderosa pines or other trees in those places. In some deserts there are many, many square miles of sand and then suddenly an area with water, and trees. This is called an oasis, and it is a delight to travelers.

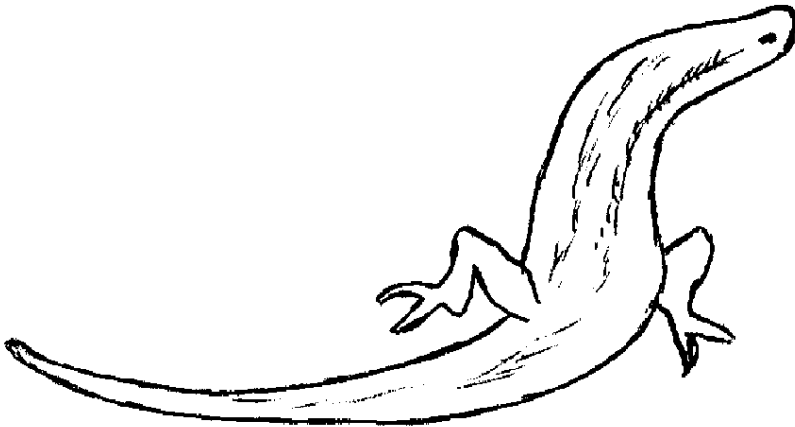


Pictured Above: A Palm Tree

ANIMALS OF THE DESERT

Only special kinds of plants can live in the desert. It is the same with animals: only special kinds can stay there. Where it is very dry, an animal must get along with only a little water. Some desert animals can store up water for a long time just as some plants do.

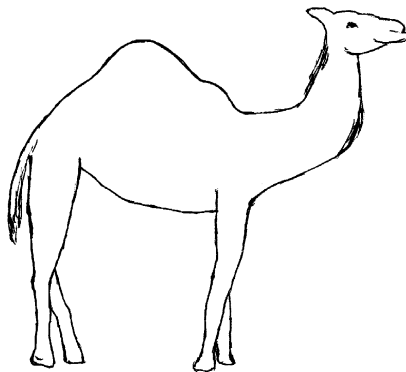
Small animals don't need as much water as large animals. So many desert animals are small. Also large animals need more shelter from the sun, and there is usually not enough shade in the desert for large animals. Insects, spiders, mice, rats and reptiles can be found in deserts. One kind of reptile is the lizard. When the sun gets too hot, lizards can run under rocks to hide from it.



Pictured Above: A Lizard

In cooler areas we may find animals that are a little larger: rabbits, squirrels, foxes, wolves and coyotes. They may dig tunnels under the ground to stay in, away from the hot sun. The animals stay in the shade as much as they can.

One large animal of the desert is the camel. To people from moist areas, camels are amazing. They can go without water for days or even months. In hot weather a camel drinks up to 20 liters of water a day. It stores this water in its body and uses it up gradually. When the weather is cooler, camels don't need as much water. And if they eat plants that have a lot of water in them, they can get along with less water. There are many camels in the Sahara Desert and in the desert areas of Ethiopia.



In some deserts there are other large animals, like horses, sheep and goats. Without human care they would die from the dryness and the heat. They can live only where there are people to take care of them.

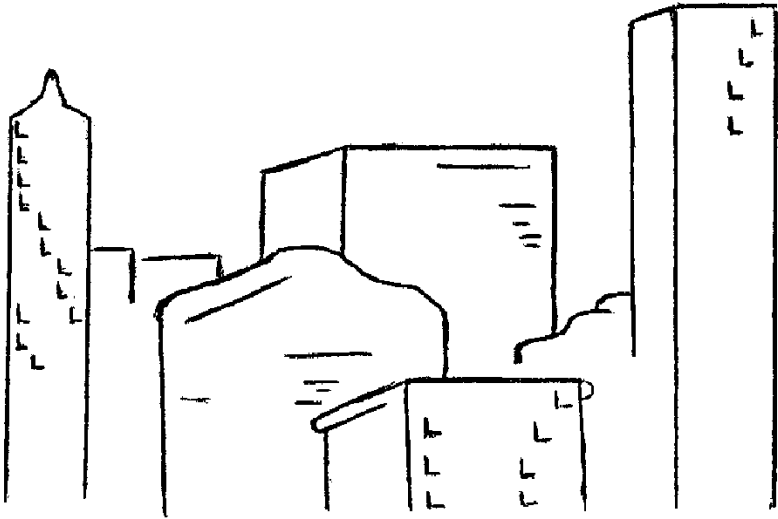
PEOPLE OF THE DESERT

Because a desert has so little rain, it is hard for people to live there. Some deserts have very few people. Some have no people at all. People in a hot desert have to wear clothes that protect them from the sun. Those in cooler deserts don't need to wear special clothes, but they still have to find a way to get water.

Many people who live in deserts are called nomads. That means they stay in one place for a while, then move to another place. They may go where they can find water for their animals, and when the water is gone, they have to move somewhere else. They may live in tents. When it is time to move they can easily fold up their tents and carry them to their next home.

If they build houses, desert people make very few windows. The windows are small, so that the sun will not make the inside of their houses too hot. Some live in tents with no windows at all. Or they may have the ceilings on their buildings very high so that the hottest air rises up above the people. They may have dark wood inside their houses, or paint their walls a dark color to cut down the glare of the sun.

There are many big cities on the desert. Some of these are Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, Timbuktu in Mali, Rawalpindi in Pakistan and Tucson in the United States.



Many, many people live in these cities. How can they find enough water for drinking, washing, and cooking? Some of these cities have lakes or rivers in them or near them. Some have springs that give plenty of water. Some people in cities near the ocean take water from the ocean and remove the salt from it so that people can drink it. But that costs a lot of money and most cities are not able to do that. Some dig wells to find water.

How do people in the desert make enough money to live? They may grow food to sell to others, like dates from the date palm tree. Their families may have had farms for thousands of years. If they live near an ocean or river, some are fishermen. They may make beautiful things with their hands such as woven rugs and carved wooden boxes and sell them. They may even trade these items with people who live far away.

Some desert people raise sheep or goats and sell the meat or skins. People who raise sheep can make cloth or clothing out of the sheep's wool and sell it and use them to help with their work or they may raise donkeys, horses or camels with carrying things. Some desert people are teachers, doctors, store-keepers or government workers. They can have the same jobs as in other parts of the world.

In many desert areas there is oil under the ground. The people who live there pump the oil out and sell it. They can make a lot of money his way, because others all over the world want to buy oil to use in their cars or trucks or to take plastic, candles and other things. Some oil is added to metal parts in cars or other machines, so that they will not rub against each other and get too hot. Then they work more smoothly.

One group of desert people are the Berbers. There are 50 million of them altogether, living in the countries of Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia.



Pictured Above: A Berber Man

Most of the Berbers are farmers. They wear long, loose clothing to keep the heat of the sun away. Some of the men wear blue-purple clothes with only a slit cut for their eyes to show through. The Berbers are known for their art, especially jewelry and items made out of leather.

- Questions for Review -

1. What is a desert?
2. Is there a desert in your country? If so, where is it and what is it called?
3. What kinds of plants do we see in deserts? How can they live where there is so little water?
4. What kinds of animals live in deserts?
How do they live where there is not much w water?
5. Name some of the things people do to make it easier to live in a desert.
6. How do desert people earn their money?

A desert is a very interesting place.

