

The Great Plains

Name _____

A drumbeat of hooves is heard from far off in the swaying grasses of the Great Plains. The silhouette of the approaching animal can almost be seen. Is it the hulking shape of a bison? These massive horned herbivores now only rarely occur in the wild due to being hunted nearly to extinction in the 1800s. Perhaps, then, this galloping creature is a pronghorn. These antelope-like grazers can reach speeds of more than fifty miles per hour and are only second to cheetahs as one of the fastest land mammals in the world.

Pronghorn and bison share their home in the Great Plains with coyotes, prairie dogs, prairie chickens, and black-footed ferrets. This region covers the area between the Interior Lowlands to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west. Both the plants and the animals here face intense environmental challenges. The Rocky Mountains cast a rain shadow into the region. This phenomenon happens because eastward-blowing winds push clouds full of rain to break on the westward side of the mountains before reaching the Plains. Consequently, the western Plains that are closer to the Rocky Mountains are much drier than the eastern Plains. This region also experiences cold winters, hot summers, and strong winds. The prairie grasses that dominate the Great Plains are resilient to these climatic extremes. These grasses have deep roots that enrich the soil in many ways. First, these roots hold in the soil to prevent erosion. Secondly, as grasses die and replenish, decaying roots fertilize the soil.

These fertile soils are attractive agricultural resources for farmers. The most common crops grown in the Great Plains are wheat and other grains. These crops tend to be drought-resistant just like the native grasses of the Plains. Unlike native grasses, however, domestic crop farming can be damaging to the region. In the 1930s, Plains farmers unknowingly caused massive droughts and dust storms by tilling, or breaking up soil, roots, and plant stalks, after the wheat harvest. Without roots to hold the soil in place, the strong prairie winds stripped the fertile soil from the land. This fifteen-year period of agricultural disaster is known as the Dust Bowl. Today, farmers carefully control soil erosion to prevent another disaster from occurring.

1. What is the author's primary purpose in the opening paragraph?

The first paragraph...

- a. tries to persuade the reader to visit the Great Plains.
- b. explains what the rest of the reading will be about.
- c. captures the reader's interest.
- d. describes the importance of grasses in the Great Plains.

2. What is a rain shadow?

- a. An area next to a mountain that gets unusually high levels of rain.
- b. An area next to a mountain that gets unusually low levels of rain.
- c. An area that is dark and rainy
- d. An area next to a mountain that is difficult to grow crops in

3. Which was not mentioned in the reading as an extreme condition in the Great Plains?

- a. Hot summers
- b. Cold winters
- c. Strong winds
- d. Tornadoes

4. What are two ways mentioned in the reading that native grasses are important for the Great Plains?

- a. The grasses provide habitat for animals and also prevent erosion
- b. The grasses provide food for grazing animals and also fertilize the soil
- c. The grasses prevent flooding and also fertilize the soil
- d. The grasses prevent erosion and also fertilize the soil

5. What natural resource does this region provide?

- a. Trees for lumber
- b. Wheat and other grains
- c. Fertile soil for growing crops
- d. Native grasses for harvesting

6. What does wheat have in common with native Plains grasses?

- a. They both are drought-resistant
- b. They both are a source of food for grazing animals
- c. They both survive the cold winters of the Plains
- d. They both are farmed in the Great Plains

7. Why did the Dust Bowl occur?

- a. Farmers ran out of room on fertile prairie lands
- b. Farmers removed the roots that held the soil in place
- c. Wheat could not withstand the dry conditions of the Great Plains
- d. Native grasses were no longer able to fertilize the soil

Answers:

1. C

2. B

3. D

4. D

5. C

6. A

7. B