Name _____ Date _____

The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project

Read the passage independently or with a partner. Underline any new or unfamiliar vocabulary words. Write any questions you have in the margins.

Rivers meet a variety of human needs: freshwater for drinking, hydroelectricity to power factories and homes, irrigation for crops, transportation for freight and people, and habitats for plants and animals. Rivers also often mark borders between countries. This can lead to power struggles between neighboring countries that both want to control a river for economic, environmental, and political reasons.

The Danube River forms part of the border between the countries of Slovakia and Hungary. This river is an example of the complications and conflicts that occur when countries share a river. The source of the Danube is in the mountains of Germany. The river flows nearly 2,900 kilometers (1,800 miles) from its source. It empties out into the Black Sea on the coasts of Romania and Ukraine. The Danube River Basin is the second largest in Europe, after the Volga. Including all its tributaries, or streams, the river system covers more than 776,966 square kilometers (300,000 square miles) and links parts of 19 countries. Its size alone makes the Danube River vital to the ecology and economy of central Europe. Historically, it was an important boundary marking the edge of the Roman Empire. Cities that were founded as Roman fortresses along the river have become modern capitals, including Vienna, Budapest, and Belgrade.

The area along the border between Slovakia and Hungary is a large floodplain. Floodplains are ecosystems full of biological diversity, where frequent flooding washes nutrient-rich silt over the land, feeding forests and cropland. Fish and migratory birds are usually abundant in these wetlands. The wetlands are critical because they serve as natural filters, cleaning pollution from upstream out of the water.

Part of the floodplain between Hungary and Slovakia is called Szigetköz. This area is home to small farms, forests, and about 5,000 species of plants and animals. Underneath the area is a large freshwater reservoir. The reservoir needs the filtration of the wetlands above it to keep it clean. In 1977, Hungary and what was then the country of Czechoslovakia agreed to build a system of dams and canals in the Szigetköz area. This would come to be known as the Gabčkovo-Nagymaros Project (pronunciation: gob-CHET-ko-vo NAHJ-mo-ra), named for the towns at each end of the dam system. The decision to build this system of dams and canals led to a major international conflict that is still not resolved over forty years later.

In the twentieth century, many countries were searching for ways to modernize and bring electricity, industry, and a higher standard of living to their people. One of the ways they tried to improve people's lives was by harnessing rivers with large dams. This could produce hydroelectric power, provide jobs, and help stop damaging floods. These kinds of projects are still built today, but much more cautiously. It was discovered that along with electricity, jobs, and flood control came lots of environmental and political problems.

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The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project, continued

The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project was agreed to in 1977. It was abandoned by the Hungarian government in the early 1980s because of worries about its environmental impact and financial problems. The Czechslovakians finished their side of the project. They completed the Gabčíkovo dam, or Cunovo dam, in 1992. In 1993, the country of Czechoslovakia split into two: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Slovakia took control of the area. The dam pushed more than 80 percent of the flow of the Danube out of its main riverbed and into a canal on the Slovak side of the river. This led to a huge drop in the Danube's water flow below the dam. The dam and canal system created several problems that upset the Hungarians:

- Fish populations declined as much as 80 percent because of the lower water levels. This causes problems for people who make a living fishing. It also threatens entire populations of endangered sturgeon, which can no longer migrate upstream to spawn.
- Other animals and plants, including rare birds, have lost their natural habitat with the elimination of some of the wetlands.
- Pesticides, fertilizers, and industrial pollution are concentrated and trapped behind the dam. This creates hazardous situations for the people who live upstream.
- The level of the freshwater reservoir underneath the Szigetköz area dropped and became contaminated with the trapped pollution.
- Farmers on the Hungarian side lost access to water for irrigating their crops because the river sank to such low levels.

Hungarians were also upset about the economic impact. Slovakia received all the money from ships that used the canal and all the electricity the hydroelectric plant produced because Slovaks had built and controlled the dam and canal. Hungarians who were living in Slovakia complained they were being squeezed into a small bit of land between the canal and the old riverbed. And the Hungarian government said that, in effect, a new border was being created between the two countries that gave Slovakia more control over the river and its resources.

But Slovakia's government believed it had acted according to the original agreement between the two countries. It believed that the Hungarians' problems stemmed from the fact that they had not followed through in building the rest of the project. Slovakia's government pointed out that the Szigetköz region escaped disaster during massive flooding along the Danube in 2002 because of the flood control provided by the dam and canal.

The two countries decided to ask international organizations, including the International Court of Justice, to help them resolve their disagreement. But the countries are still in conflict after years of meetings.

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