Teacher's notes and answer key

The Naga Fireballs of the Mekong – an Unsolved Mystery

Subjects: English · Religious Studies · Geography · Science | recommended from age 12 (B1) | Video: 8:59 min

Answers B

1. In northeastern Thailand, Nong Khai province, around the district of Phon Phisai; Laos is on the opposite bank. On the full moon of the eleventh lunar month, at the end of Buddhist Lent (Ok Phansa), usually in October. Name: bang fai phaya nak – “the rockets of the Naga King”.

2. Enormous serpent beings with roots in ancient India; they live in palaces beneath rivers and lakes, guard treasures and bring the rains. Two Naga kings quarrelled and gouged channels into the earth as they chased each other; the channels became rivers, the greatest of them the Mekong.

3. When a storm raged for days after his enlightenment, Mucalinda coiled beneath the Buddha and spread his hoods over him like an umbrella. A Naga who wanted to become a monk took human form, was discovered in his sleep and had to leave; he asked to be remembered – hence 'nak'.

4. The camera showed the Lao bank, where figures were apparently firing into the sky; message: tracer rounds. Counter-arguments: tracer rounds are loud, fly in a straight line and fall back in an arc; the fireballs are said to rise silently straight out of the water; older residents say they saw them as children (almost impossible to prove).

5. Plants and mud rot on the riverbed, producing gases like methane and possibly phosphine, which can ignite on its own in air; rising bubbles might burst into flame. Gaps: marsh gas burns weakly and low to the ground; why glowing orbs climbing high, and why so often around one full-moon night? No sample, no measurement at the source.

Answer C

Correct numbers from top to bottom: 4 – 7 – 1 – 6 – 2 – 8 – 3 – 5

Notes on D and E

D1: Most people don't come to test a hypothesis but to sit by the river together, pray and wait for a sign. D2 (e.g.): dependence on the Mekong (fish, water for rice, rich silt) and respect for the river; a bridge between Buddhism and older beliefs in water and earth spirits; a bridge between Thailand and Laos; the question of who protects the river today (dams, shrinking fish stocks).

E: Naga – for: tradition, eyewitnesses, lights silent and coming from the water / against: cannot be tested scientifically. Tracer rounds – for: TV report, some lights very likely fireworks or gunfire / against: shots are loud, different flight path. Gas – for: methane/phosphine form on the riverbed, timing after the monsoon / against: marsh gas burns weakly and low, no sample. The video's conclusion: no final solution, probably not every light has the same cause.

Extra: the famous photo of a “captured Naga” actually shows an oarfish, photographed in California in the 1990s – a good starting point for talking about image sources.

Content note and age

Recommended from age 12. No distressing scenes; it is briefly mentioned that people who drowned were sometimes said to have been “taken by the Naga”. Naga belief is a living religious tradition in Thailand and Laos – please treat it with respect; the tasks deliberately separate belief from scientific explanation without dismissing the belief.

Background: Naga traditions (Mucalinda, the Naga monk), the Ok Phansa festival; a Thai TV report in the early 2000s; the feature film “Mekhong Full Moon Party” (2002). The phenomenon remains unexplained.

The narrator's voice and the illustrations in the video are AI-generated; the script follows the established tradition. You are welcome to copy and share this worksheet for classroom use.

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