

HOW DID EARLY SOCIETIES


When hunter-gatherers settled in an area, they often made changes to their environment. As you read about various environmental practices used by early societies, think about the immediate and long-term consequences of each practice.

SALTY SOIL IN MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamian irrigation systems of dams, canals, dikes, and ditches provided many benefits. Irrigation enabled farmers to grow more crops and to grow crops in areas where there was not enough rainfall. This helped Mesopotamian societies prosper.

But water contains salts, which are left behind when water evaporates. After many years of irrigation in Mesopotamia, the salts built up in the soil. This process is called **salinization**. Salinization prevents plants from taking up water from the soil. So the plants die.

Salt buildup is not as much of a problem in areas that are snowy in winter. Melting snow washes away the salts. But in hot, dry areas such as Mesopotamia, nothing washes away the salts. Some historians have concluded that salinization contributed to the collapse of Mesopotamia.



Ancient Mesopotamia was located in the present-day country of Iraq. Salinization remains a problem in Iraq today, as this photo shows. **Q:** What do you see? What long-term consequences do you think salinization would have caused in ancient Mesopotamia?

S AFFECT THE ENVIRONMENT?

SLASH-AND-BURN FARMING

Starting in about 2600 BCE, the Maya began settling in an area that extended south from present-day southern Mexico.

The Maya used a method called **slash and burn** to clear away forest and brush so that they could use land for farming. Slash and burn involves cutting down and burning trees and brush. The ash left behind is high in nutrients and provides a rich layer of fertilizer that helps crops thrive.

But land cleared this way is often fertile for only a few years. Over time, the crops use up the nutrients in the soil. With no trees and their root systems to keep the soil in place and hold moisture, winds and rain wash away the soil and nutrients. Flooding occurs, and even wild native plants have trouble growing.

Q: Consider the consequences of using slash and burn. Are these consequences largely positive or largely negative? Explain your judgment.

Where the Maya Lived



This photo shows land that is being cleared for farming using the slash-and-burn method. When fields cleared this way became infertile, a farming family would move on and use the same method to clear different fields. A farmer might return to the original land once the soil had started to recover and become fertile again.

