Arabia’s Empty Quarter

The Arabian Peninsula is nearly covered by desert. In the south lies the vast *Rub’ al Khali*, or Empty Quarter. This area covers about 250,000 square miles (647,500 sq. km)—an area larger than France. About 80 percent of the Rub’ al Khali lies in Saudi Arabia, comprising about one-fourth of the country’s land surface. For centuries, the region has been seen as little more than a wasteland, with Bedouin nomads the only people living near the area—and even then, only along its edges. Archaeologists, however, have found evidence of ancient caravan trails and trading cities buried beneath its sands.

Sand dunes in the Rub’ al Khali rise up to 800 feet (244 m). Dunes that have formed in orderly lines are called *uruquins*, or veins. Bedouins use the valleys between them as roadways for travel. Many valleys hold salt-covered plains called *sebkhas*, which vary from firm surfaces to brittle crusts that can collapse beneath a traveler’s foot.

An expedition led by the Saudi Geological Survey in 2006 discovered 31 new plant species or varieties and 24 species of birds. Various fossilized creatures as well as meteor rocks also were found, along with many ancient wells. These findings—combined with the huge oil reserves already known to lie beneath the Rub’ al Khali—have led some to propose a new name for the region: *Rub al Ghali*, or Valuable Quarter.

**The Empty Quarter**

Directions: On a separate sheet of paper, answer these questions.

1. **Analyzing** Which four countries have territory lying within the Rub’ al Khali?

2. **Drawing Conclusions** What do you suppose is the most valuable resource of the Rub’ al Khali to the Bedouins?
The following activities are ways the basic lesson can be modified to accommodate students’ different learning styles.

### English Learners (EL)

The reading contains several non-English words. Ask EL students to identify them. Then ask them to find at least one source where they might learn how to pronounce these words.

### Verbal/Linguistic; Intrapersonal

Assign students to summarize the adventures of Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger, two of the first people to cross the Rub’ al Khali and who wrote extensively about the region.

### Logical/Mathematical

Have students use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the Rub’ al Khali with another large desert in North Africa, Southwest Asia, or Central Asia. One circle of the diagram should be labeled “Rub’ al Khali”; the other circle should be labeled with the name of the second desert. Students should then research features of both areas, writing information about each in the appropriate circle of the diagram. Ways in which both deserts are similar fit into the overlapping area.

### Visual/Spatial

Ask students to research some ways the environment of the Rub’ al Khali influences the clothing worn by the Bedouins who skirt its fringes. Students should sketch some examples of traditional and contemporary clothing and explain how and why they are worn. Display students’ drawings in class.

### Advanced Learners

The discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in the 1930s drastically changed the region. Ask students to write a three-page history of the discovery and exploration of oil in the region—including the Rub’ al Khali—focusing especially on life in Saudi Arabia before and after the discovery.

### Kinesthetic

Ask students to research more about the physical geography and geology of the Rub’ al Khali and construct models of the region. Display students’ models in class.

### Visual/Spatial

Assign students to create maps of ancient caravan routes through the Rub’ al Khali with locations of trade cities such as Ubar (also known as Iram) indicated. Students also should add a paragraph or two to their maps explaining why and how desertification eventually destroyed these ancient routes and cities.

### Below Grade Level

A Think/Write-Pair-Share strategy engages students in their subject matter through discussion. Have students Think silently about what they know concerning deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. Ask them to Write three to five of these facts. Have students Pair with a partner and Share their ideas. Conclude with a class Share discussion.