

The bitter future of chocolate? How drought and a youth exodus threaten Mexico's prized cocoa

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What is your favourite type of chocolate? Do you know where it comes from or how it's made?
- How do you think climate change and fewer young farmers might affect the future of food production?

2 Key words

a. Match the words below with their definitions. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 1. crop | a. a small, special group of people who have more power or money than others |
| 2. shade | b. to stop doing something, like a job or an activity |
| 3. harvest | c. periods of ten years |
| 4. rural | d. ways of doing something, especially planned or organised ways |
| 5. decades | e. a plant such as rice or cocoa grown by farmers for food |
| 6. quit | f. to collect crops from the fields |
| 7. methods | g. not having enough of something |
| 8. lack of | h. a measurement of land (approximately the size of a sports field) |
| 9. evaporation | i. relating to the countryside, not the city |
| 10. hectares | j. when a liquid (like water) changes into a gas because of heat |
| 11. elite | k. said what you think will happen in the future |
| 12. predicted | l. an area that is darker and cooler because there is no sunlight |

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. After much thought, Sally decided to _____ her job as a chef and start her own business.
2. Life in _____ areas of the country is usually more peaceful and quiet than the city.
3. The country's _____ attended an exclusive event at one of the capital's top restaurants.
4. We _____ our grapes last week, which we'll sell at the market.
5. The trees provided _____ during the hot afternoon, making it a perfect spot to rest.
6. Our family has been working on the farm for six _____, passing down knowledge from generation to generation.
7. The main _____ produced on the island of Jersey is potatoes.
8. The weather forecast _____ heavy rain for the weekend across the whole country.
9. The school adopted new teaching _____ to help students improve their problem-solving skills.
10. The _____ water during the dry season caused many of the garden plants to die.
11. _____ of water from the lake is faster during the summer months due to high temperatures.
12. The farm covers 100 _____, with about half of that dedicated to animals.

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Mattha Busby
3 September, 2024

- 1 Edilberto Morales has been growing cocoa, the main ingredient in chocolate, in southern Mexico for many years. Usually, he harvests around 1,000 kilograms of cocoa each year. However, last year he only managed half that amount because there was very little rain.
- 2 "Climate change has affected us a lot," says Morales, from Chiapas. He explains that cocoa pods need rain to grow, especially during very hot weather. Cocoa is a plant that grows best in the shade. It comes from Mexico and has been used as a crop for more than 3,000 years. The Maya, Toltec and Aztec peoples all grew cocoa, but consumption of drinks made from cocoa was limited to the Aztec elite.
- 3 When the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, they transported cocoa to Europe. Italians later added sugar to make the first chocolate sweets. Over time, other countries, like Ghana, Ivory Coast and Indonesia, began growing cocoa. Mexico is now the 14th largest cocoa producer in the world.
- 4 Today, the future of chocolate is at risk. Several problems, especially climate change, are affecting cocoa production. Weather is becoming more extreme and rivers that farmers rely on for water are drying up. Some scientists hope genetically modified (GMO) cocoa plants will help, but so far, no solution has been found. At the same time, many young people are leaving rural areas to live in cities. This makes it harder for farmers to pass on their knowledge of cocoa farming to the next generation.
- 5 Cocoa prices are also increasing because of shortages. In August 2023, one tonne of cocoa cost 3,400 US dollars. By mid-2024, the price had risen to nearly 8,400 US dollars. "The prices keep going up," says Eder Herrera, a cocoa farmer from Tapachula. "This year has been one of the hottest ever."
- 6 Herrera explains that dry seasons are longer now, and even when it rains, it stays very hot. Recently, temperatures reached 42°C. He also says that deforestation, or cutting down trees, has made the problem worse by reducing rainfall and increasing evaporation.
- 7 Cocoa farming has been difficult for decades. In the 1970s, Herrera had 600 hectares of cocoa and fruit trees. Today, he only has 200 hectares. In 2007, a disease wiped out 90 per cent of crops in Chiapas, forcing many farmers to quit. Some started growing coffee, honey, or mangoes, while others cleared their land for cattle farming.
- 8 To help cocoa farmers, Herrera works with the Rainforest Alliance. They are learning new farming methods, like planting rainforest trees to provide shade for cocoa plants. Shade reduces heat and evaporation, which helps cocoa trees grow better.
- 9 However, a lack of interest from young people makes the situation worse. A 2014 report predicted that by 2051, there would be 167 adults over 60 for every 100 children in Mexico. Young people often leave farming communities to find better-paying jobs in cities or abroad.
- 10 Julio Salazar, the founder of the Mexican chocolate brand Jangala, says it's hard to find workers. Even when young people stay, they expect high wages like those in city jobs. To keep farming traditions alive, Jangala holds workshops near Tapachula to teach young people how to grow cocoa and connect them with their families' farming traditions.
- 11 But Morales remains doubtful. "There is little interest among the young people because they want to live in cities and don't value field work," he says. "They see it as a lot of effort."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer a, b or c.

1. How many kilograms of cocoa does Edilberto Morales usually harvest each year?
 - a) 500 kilograms
 - b) 1,000 kilograms
 - c) 1,500 kilograms
2. Which ancient peoples grew cocoa in Mexico?
 - a) the Greeks and the Romans
 - b) the Maya, Toltec and Aztec
 - c) the Spanish and the Italians
3. Who first brought cocoa to Europe?
 - a) the Italians
 - b) the Maya
 - c) the Spanish
4. What is currently threatening the future of chocolate production?
 - a) high prices
 - b) climate change
 - c) a lack of workers
5. Who is Julio Salazar?
 - a) a cocoa farmer
 - b) the owner of a chocolate company
 - c) a Rainforest Alliance worker

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6. Why do young people want to leave farming communities?
- a) They want to live in cities.
 - b) They find farming difficult.
 - c) both a and b

4 Key language

a. Find the verbs in the text and match them with a preposition from the box.

down

on

on

out

up

up

- 1. rely _____
- 2. dry _____
- 3. pass _____
- 4. cut _____
- 5. wipe _____
- 6. go _____

b. Read the definitions and then complete the examples with a phrasal verb from task a in the correct form.

- 1. to need support or help from someone or something, so you can do what you need to do
Many people _____ public transport to get to work every day.
- 2. to increase in price, amount or level
The cost of living _____ a lot in recent years.
- 3. to share something from one generation to the next
Cultural traditions are often _____ through stories and songs.
- 4. to remove trees from an area
The company _____ the forest to make space for new buildings.

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5. to destroy or remove completely

The disease nearly _____ a species of bird in the region.

6. (for a river) to have no water in it

Due to the long hot summer, the river completely _____.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- How often do you eat chocolate?
- Do you know where chocolate comes from?
- How do you think climate change might affect food production?
- Why do you think young people are leaving rural areas?

6 In your own words

a. Go online and look for other crops or agricultural produce that are affected by climate change. Use the questions below to prepare a short presentation about the crop.

- What kind of plant or produce is it?
- What products are made from it (e.g. food products, clothing)?
- How is it grown and harvested? What part of the process is affected by climate change and how? Are there other problems with cultivating this crop? What are they?
- What solutions, if any, have people tried so far?

b. Share your presentations in small groups.