

# The Land of Frankincense

## Aim and introduction

Frankincense is primarily grown in arid and semi-arid regions. The main areas where it is found are the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Yemen and Oman, northeast Africa, including Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan, and in the subtropical region of India.

In this lesson students will learn about the frankincense tree, examining its unique adaptations and cultural significance in Oman. They will also investigate the impact of climate change on the tree and the Land of Frankincense, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Dhofar region.

This lesson will take between 45 and 60 minutes.

## Curriculum links

AQA 3.1.2.1. Deserts as natural systems. Characteristics of hot desert environments and their margins: climate, soils and vegetation (and their interaction). Water balance and aridity index.

OCR 1.1.3 Option C – Dryland Landscapes. 1.b. Dryland landscapes are influenced by a range of physical factors.

WJEC 4.2: Ecosystems. 4.2.1 The value and distribution of ecosystems.

## Learning goals

1. Know what frankincense is and why it is sought after.
2. Describe the location of the Land of Frankincense, predicted climate change and its impacts.
3. Understand the alternative possible futures for the local population of the Dhofar region.

## Learning outcomes

Greater depth: Students will describe in detail what frankincense is, and why it is a traded commodity. They will be able to explain why it is expensive, using geographical language and locations across the southern Arabian Peninsula. In the process they will expertly utilise layered GIS maps, and the WWF Risk Filter Suite. Some might be able to comment on the dangers of overharvesting.

Expected level: Students will describe what frankincense is, and why it is a traded commodity. They will be able to explain why it is expensive, using geographical language and locations across the southern Arabian Peninsula. In the process, they will use layered GIS maps, and the WWF Risk Filter Suite.

Working towards: Students will describe what frankincense is, and why it is a traded commodity. They will be able to explain why it is expensive, using geographical language. They will be introduced to ArcGIS and will learn the basics of how to use the software.

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## Key terms

- **Commodity**  
*A basic good or raw material which is interchangeable with other goods, typically traded on exchanges where price is determined by demand and supply.*
- **Frankincense**  
*Frankincense is an aromatic gum resin obtained from trees. It is primarily found in regions such as Somalia, along the southern coastal of Arabia, and in parts of India.*

## **Challenge and support**

To challenge students read this document and follow the *Ask students* subheadings. Encourage them to create a fact file on frankincense and the history of the resin across South Arabia.

To support students consider marking some of the cards to help with the card sort. Giving students a time stamp for each of the video questions will help.

## **Starter**

Ask students to discuss the picture on their sheets (also on the PowerPoint) suggested answers are in italics.

What does it show? What are its uses around the world?

*The image shows a man scraping what looks like crystals from the trunk of a tree. This is frankincense. Some uses of frankincense are in perfumes, cosmetics and some religious ceremonies.*

What geographical features can you identify in the picture, and how might they influence the cultivation of frankincense in Oman?

*The picture shows the rugged terrain and arid landscape of the Dhofar region in Oman. These geographical features, including the rocky soil and dry climate, are ideal for the growth of *Boswellia sacra* trees, which produce frankincense.*

How does the landscape in the picture reflect the climate of the region where frankincense is produced?

*This picture shows a semi-arid to arid climate. The area experiences a unique climate influenced by the southwest monsoon, which brings moisture and cooler temperatures to Dhofar. This supports the growth of frankincense trees by providing the right balance of dryness and occasional moisture.*

Describe the traditional harvesting method of frankincense depicted in this picture.

*Harvesters make small incisions in the bark of the frankincense trees to collect the resin. The dry climate helps the resin to harden quickly, making it easier to collect.*

What challenges might farmers face in this region when cultivating and harvesting frankincense?

*Farmers in this region might face challenges such as overgrazing by livestock, which can damage young trees, and overharvesting, which can deplete the resin supply and harm the trees.*

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Card sort

Ask students to sort the cards into two groups, under the headings: description (orange), and uses (yellow). Answers below.

Frankincense is an iconic commodity harvested from wild Boswellia trees	Frankincense trees are found in the Dhofar region of Oman, particularly in the Wadi Dawkah area	Frankincense is used in essential oils for its calming properties
Traditional Chinese medicine believes it has health benefits	Skincare products use frankincense for anti-inflammation and anti-aging	The Land of Frankincense is a UNESCO World Heritage
It is a unique scent used in perfumes	In many religious and spiritual practices incense is burnt	Overharvesting and habitat loss have led to a decline in frankincense tree populations
Frankincense is commonly used in meditation practises	It has healing properties of cleansing and enlightenment	Burning Frankincense is a key aspect of hospitality, and drives off flying insects
It is known as the desert tears	The desert these trees grow in is called Rub' al Khali	It has been used for over 5,000 years, famously given to Jesus by the Magi (the Three Wise Men)

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