Dams, Levees, and Dikes

People have built **dams** for thousands of years. The first large dam was built in Egypt over 5,000 years ago!

Dams come in many shapes and sizes. But all dams have one thing in common: They block the flow of a river.

Dams help people in many ways. They create electricity and prevent flooding. They give us water for **irrigation**, too.

But sometimes dams can harm the environment. Dams stop the flow of water. The water has to go somewhere. It can flood miles of river valleys and canyons behind the dam. The flooding destroys plant and animal habitats.

Dams can cause temperature changes that affect plants and animals living in a river. Dams also block the movement of fish from one end of the river to the other.

People must work together to balance the good and bad effects of dams.

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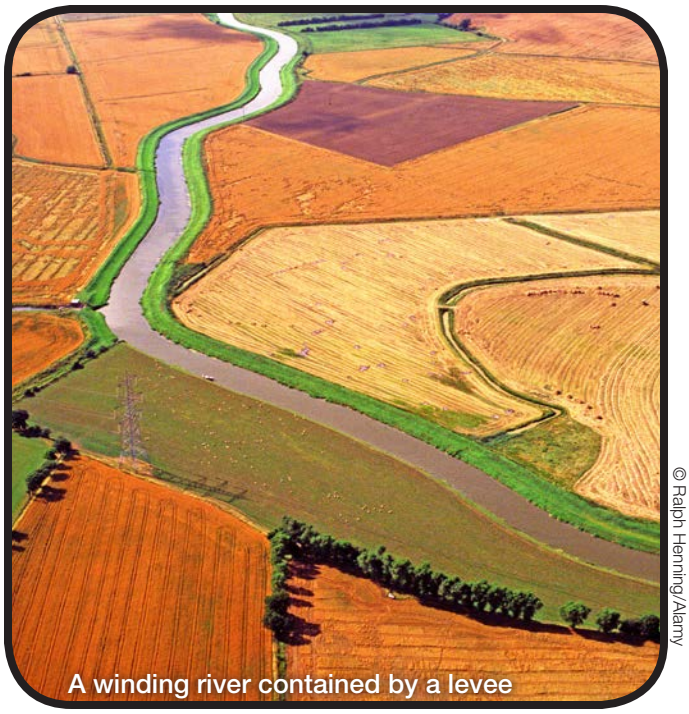
Hoover Dam created Lake Mead by blocking the Colorado River.



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A winding river contained by a levee

People living next to rivers, lakes, and canals don't want their land to become flooded. So they build **levees** or **dikes.** These structures are earthen or concrete walls built along a body of water. They prevent water from rivers or lakes from flooding the surrounding land.

A river behind a levee may rise up to 6 meters (20 ft.) higher than the land around it. In rare cases, levees fail. This happened in 2005, when a hurricane hit New Orleans, Louisiana. The levees there burst. Terrible flooding followed.

Brain Check

- ❑ Why do people build dams?
- ❑ What are some problems with dams?
- ❑ How do levees and dikes help people?