

Fact or Opinion

Toothpicks Anyone?

Toothpicks, ordinary household items that we now take for granted, have a long known history. Their modern use in America and Europe follows centuries of use by ancient people. Evidence of their use over a million years ago has been found in Ethiopia.

Remains of our prehistoric ancestors have been found in Ethiopia that show teeth with grooves in them that scientists believe might have been caused by the use of wooden picks. These grooves were unique to one tribe and were not found on teeth of people from other tribes. Toothpicks may have been among the first tools used by these people.

Ancient men may have turned to the use of toothpicks because teeth were necessary to survival for these people. They had to contend with many hazards in their quest for food, and good teeth kept them healthy enough to meet the challenges of prehistoric living. Teeth were used not only for biting and chewing food but also as tools for cutting, breaking, and softening materials. Loss of teeth was thus a serious problem for them.

These prehistoric people must have made the connection between decaying accumulations of food in the teeth and subsequent painful infections, but they had no knowledge of how to restore teeth, so they would have to remove an offending tooth. Loss of teeth would have resulted in reduced ability to function in their harsh environment, so the tiny pieces of wood that served early people as toothpicks aided their survival and development.

Ancient people were not the only ones who saw the value in using toothpicks to clean their teeth. Just a few hundred years ago, it was noticed that elderly people in certain parts of Russia still had their teeth when most people of their age had lost them to decay. Investigators found that it was because these people used splinters of wood to poke out bits of food from between their teeth after eating. Toothpicks then became standard items for diners on both sides of the Atlantic.

The toothpicks of today are similar in function to the early ones, but they are now carefully manufactured rather than pulled off a handy piece of wood. They have developed from random wood splinters to the smooth, polished products made of wood, metal, or plastic that we can buy in markets today. There are even toothpicks made especially for use in cleaning teeth.

1. Which sentence states a FACT?

- A. Use of toothpicks in America and Europe may have been predated by use in Ethiopia.**
- B. Tribes of early primitive people seem to have used toothpicks.**
- C. Toothpicks may have been among the first tools used by prehistoric people.**
- D. Grooves have been found on the teeth of prehistoric people.**

Mmmmm...good! There's nothing like a steaming, hot bowl of bird's nest soup!

This may sound disgusting to some people, but bird's nest soup is a real delicacy in China where people have probably been eating it for 1,500 years. The Chinese believe this soup, made from the nest of the white-nest swiftlet or the black-nest swiftlet, gives them energy and cures many ailments.

There are many different recipes for preparing bird's nest soup. Most of them include chicken broth, meat (chicken, ham, or snake), herbs and other ingredients, and, of course, birds' nests. The cooked nests look like very fine noodles, and some people claim this soup is the most delicious food they have ever tasted. At the price of \$50 per bowl in some Hong Kong restaurants, it is certainly one of the most expensive foods on Earth and one of the most interesting!

Swiftlet nests were once found in China, but the high demand for them exhausted local supplies long ago. Now, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam supply most of the nests prepared by Chinese chefs around the world. The tiny nests come from deep inside dark sea caves, where male swiftlets build them on the walls, hundreds of feet up from the cave floor. They are made of a sticky, gelatinous substance secreted from salivary glands under the bird's tongue. The material comes out of the bird's mouth like a strand of soft spaghetti. The swiftlet weaves the strands into the shape of a half teacup, about two inches wide, attached to the rock wall. As it dries, the nest takes on a rubbery texture.

The white nests, which are made almost entirely of dried bird saliva, are the more expensive of the two edible nests. They sell for \$1,000 to \$4,000 per pound. The price fluctuates from one year to the next, depending on the quality and quantity of nests collected. Black nests are cheaper and contain feathers, insects, and twigs that must be removed with tweezers before they are eaten.

Nest gathering is very risky. Workers climb vines and bamboo poles to reach the nests while carrying torches in their teeth to light the way. They walk across bamboo bridges no wider than their feet, twenty to thirty stories above the cave floor. There are no ropes, handrails, or safety nets. Stepping on a rotten piece of bamboo or losing a grip can be fatal. Poachers, pirates, and hijackers are also a constant threat. The caves are protected by barbed wire, land mines, and armed guards, and the nests are shipped secretly, under heavy security.

Nest gathering season is from February through May. Collectors gather nests two or three times during this period. The first nests of the season are collected before the female swiftlets lay eggs in them. The males usually rebuild the nests in the same location. Collectors may also take this second nest before the female lays her eggs, or they may leave it for her to raise her young. If the second nest is taken early, the male swiftlet usually builds a third nest that is not supposed to be harvested until after the baby birds have left.

However, some harvesters remove the nests from the caves before the baby birds fly away. The eggs or chicks are dumped on the cave floor where they are eaten by cockroaches and other scavengers. Because of this, the birds' numbers are dwindling. Some experts believe that the swiftlets will be extinct in five to ten years if steps aren't taken to control nest harvesting.

Environmental groups are recommending that the swiftlets be placed on the endangered species list. This would protect them from extinction and ensure that people can continue to enjoy bird's nest soup in the future.

2. Which of the following is an opinion rather than a fact?
 - A. There are many different recipes for preparing bird's nest soup.
 - B. Bird's nest soup is one of the most delicious foods in the world.
 - C. Gathering swiftlet nests is very risky.
 - D. Swiftlet nests have a rubbery texture.

3. Black Holes

Astronomers believe that invisible objects they call black holes exist in space. A black hole is thought to be a huge lump of matter (such as a large star) that has collapsed. A star collapses when it runs out of the fuel that keeps its core temperature hot enough to constantly melt hydrogen atoms together. As the star collapses, it is compressed to an extremely compact state. For example, a star the size of Earth would be compressed to the size of a ping pong ball.

In this compact state, the star is extremely dense. The star's density causes its surface gravity to increase tremendously. The gravity becomes so great that the star's light cannot escape, and the star becomes invisible. In addition, the star becomes able to attract and hold nearby objects in orbit.

Because black holes are invisible, astronomers have had to find nonvisual evidence that they exist. One source of this evidence was found in 1855 when a star in another galaxy suddenly shone brighter than ten million suns for twenty-five days and then faded so that it was no longer visible. Another bit of evidence was observed in the early 1970s when some astronomers found that a star in the constellation Cygnus was orbiting around an invisible object.

Black holes may explain how the universe is held together. The gravitational forces of the heavenly bodies we can see or account for could not begin to keep it from expanding forever. Some astronomers think that one-third of our galaxy might be made up of black holes.

3. Which sentence states an opinion?

- A. Astronomers have had to find nonvisual evidence that black holes exist.**
- B. In 1855, a star in another galaxy faded until it became invisible.**
- C. Astronomers found that a star was orbiting around an invisible object.**
- D. Black holes may explain how the universe is held together.**