

Information on the Amazon Rainforest in Brazil



Rainforests are distinguished from other forests in that they receive an enormous amount of rain—between 100 and 400 inches each year. The Amazon is the largest rainforest in the world. Roughly the size of the continental United States, it spreads across nine countries in South America, though most of it falls inside the borders of Brazil. Flowing through the rainforest is the Amazon River, the largest river in the world. Twenty percent of the earth's freshwater flows through the Amazon River and its tributaries (smaller rivers that flow into the Amazon). The rivers and rainforest of the Amazon make up a large basin (a region drained by a single river system). The Amazon Basin is like a funnel, with its wide end at the Andes mountains. The funnel gradually narrows as the tributaries head into the Amazon River, with the water flowing east to west toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Located in the tropics, rainforest climates like the Amazon tend to be hot, humid, and lush (full of vegetation). These fertile forests are valuable resources because they are home to the most diverse group of animal and vegetable species on earth. In the Amazon rainforest, for example, 300 species of trees may be found in 2.5 acres of forest (5 to 10 species would be found in the same area of a California forest). Tropical rainforests like the Amazon are also important because they serve as the "lungs of the earth," converting large amounts of carbon dioxide into oxygen in the earth's atmosphere.

In most countries of the Amazon Basin, such as Brazil, the rainforest was undeveloped and unexplored for hundreds of years until the 1960s. The Brazilian government decided in the 1960s that the resources of the Amazon rainforest—rare hardwood from trees, fertile land for farming and grazing cattle, water power from dammed rivers, and minerals from the earth such as gold and iron—could be used to make Brazil a wealthy country. To encourage Brazilians to settle in and develop the rainforest, the government gave away land to wealthy ranchers and to poor landless Brazilians from the eastern part of the country.

The development of the Amazonian rainforest in Brazil has created several problems. Millions of native Amazonians (Indians) have lived in the rainforest for thousands of years and claim the land. Rubber tappers (people who tap rubber from wild rubber trees) have lived in the Amazon since the 1800s and claimed many parts of the rainforest as well. As a result, many of the groups living in the Amazon have disagreed and sometimes fought violently over land claims. And, despite efforts to farm deforested land, rainforest soil was found to be poor for growing crops.

Perhaps the most severe problem is that deforestation of the rainforest happened rapidly. Settlers and ranchers often slashed (cut) and burned the forest to clear it for farming or selling (deforested land sells for 33 percent more than forested land). By 1990, 75,000 acres of rainforest were deforested each day. By 1995, 15 percent of the Amazon forest had been cleared. Environmentalists are concerned because deforestation has led to the extinction of many species of plants and animals not found anywhere else on earth. They are also concerned that deforestation is causing a gradual global warming, or greenhouse effect.

1. What percent of the earth's fresh water flows through the Amazon?
2. Why are rainforests so important?
3. In what ways has the Brazilian government encouraged development of the rainforest?
4. What problems have been created by development of the Brazilian rainforest?
5. What are the environmentalists' concerns regarding development of the rainforest?