



Save the Amazon!

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The Amazon rainforest is in Brazil

The Amazon rainforest is being cleared at an alarming rate, say environmentalists.

It's the home of the hyacinth macaw, jaguar, piranha and poison dart frog. The Amazon is the world's largest rainforest and covers a huge area of South America – but for how long?

Over the last 30 years the area of the Amazon within Brazil has shrunk in size by a fifth.

How is this happening?

People are clearing the forest. Logging takes place in the Amazon because of the valuable trees that grow there. Cedar and mahogany are just two kinds of trees that have been cut down and sold by logging companies working in the region for many years. People also start fires in the Amazon, to clear land they would like to farm. In most cases, setting fires in the forest is against the law.

Soya beans grow well in the climate of the Amazon. Cattle farming is also big business.

At least 20 million people live in the Amazon in Brazil. Many live in poverty, on just a few dollars a day. So who can blame Brazilians for using their country's natural resources to make their lives better?

World Wildlife Fund: '20 million people live in the Brazilian Amazon'

International charities, like Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, worry that the Amazon is being cleared too quickly. Why?

Firstly, scientists studying different ecosystems around the world have found that the rainforest eco-system is 'top of the tree' for biodiversity. Many, many different kinds of wildlife live in this type of environment.

As the rainforest is being cleared so rapidly, conservation experts say we don't know enough about what we are losing. Only a tiny fraction of rainforest plants have been studied so far.

Scientist: 'It's like destroying a book we haven't yet read.'



The hyacinth macaw is one of the Amazon's endangered animals.



Cattle ranches cover much of the land that has been cleared.



Evidence of logging and fire damage in the Amazon.

New farmland, created by clearing areas of rainforest, isn't good to grow crops on for long. This is because when you take away the trees, you also lose the source of the rotting leaf litter that helped the soil stay fertile. Take away the trees, and you've also lost the rotting leaf litter that was the secret of its success.

Recently, researchers have also linked forest clearance to changing weather patterns, including falling rainfall figures (less rainfall falling!), on farmland where rainforest once stood.

Important for everyone

And then there's climate change. The Amazon rainforest covers 5,500,000 square kilometres – it's over half the size of Europe. Nicknamed the 'lungs of our planet', plants in the Amazon produce one-fifth of the Earth's oxygen. The intense, year-round sunshine at the Equator creates a perfect home for plants: trees grow tall, up to 70 metres in height! Oxygen is released as part of this process of photosynthesis and carbon dioxide, a climate-changing gas, is absorbed by growing plants – so, say environmentalists, the Amazon is important for everyone, no matter where they live.

Greenpeace: **'Brazil must take the lead.'**

More than half of the Amazon is in Brazil, although the forest stretches beyond Brazil's borders into eight other countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela.

Because of its size, the Brazilian National Institute of Space Research uses satellite images to keep track of deforestation. Forest protection police travel thousands of miles by helicopter to reach remote areas of the dense jungle to shut down the camps of illegal loggers.

But, say environmentalists, Brazil's government is still not doing enough. They claim the rate of deforestation is still too fast and suggest that we don't really understand what we are losing. 'It's like destroying a book we haven't yet read' is a common phrase used to describe the disappearance of the world's most famous rainforest.



Timber factory in the Amazon



Police in helicopters can spot fires and areas cleared illegally.

Glossary

Biodiversity The number of different types of plants and animals found in a particular environment (eco-system).

Carbon dioxide A climate-changing gas found in our atmosphere. Human activity has release (emitted) too much carbon dioxide over the past few hundred years, changing our climate.

Deforestation The cutting down or clearing of trees and other plants from an area of forest.

Illegal Against the law.

Rainforests Forests that are home to many different types of plants and animals. They are located close to the Equator in places with a tropical climate, which is warm and wet all year-round.

Photosynthesis Can be literally translated from the Greek words from light 'photo' and putting together or 'synthesis' meaning putting together, using light. This scientific term describes the way plants use the sun's energy to make their own food to grow. Plants also need carbon dioxide and water to photosynthesize.

Poverty People who don't have enough food to eat, little or no shelter and few belongings live in poverty.