



Amazon and its People

The world's ancient forests are disappearing at an alarming rate. Of the remaining ancient forests, the Amazon is the largest and the most biologically diverse. The Brazilian Amazon alone is home to 20 million people including 400 different indigenous groups and the future of the Amazon depends on the future of those that call the forest home.

The Amazon is one of the richest areas of the world in animal and plant diversity. There can be more plant species in one hectare of Amazon rainforest than there are in all of Europe.

The diversity and contrast of life in the Amazon is startling. The Amazon water lily is the biggest flower in the world with a diameter of two metres. The Caranguejeira spider is bigger than a baseball and one species of monkey weighing 130 grams is about the size of a toothbrush.

The Amazon is also home to 57 endangered species including the jaguar. The jaguar population was all but wiped out by hunting for the fur trade before it was designated a protected species. Even now, virtually nothing is known about the jaguars' lifestyle, but some indigenous cultures of the Amazon revere the jaguar above all forest creatures.

Yet the range of plant and animal species in the Amazon remains largely unknown. Scientists estimate that only 40 percent of all insect species have so far been identified. Over 300,000 species of plants have been identified, but an estimated 20,000 remain undiscovered. In the 1990s alone, seven species of monkeys, two species of birds and dozens of species of frogs and fish have been discovered.

This rich and complex natural tapestry of forest life is interwoven with the people living in the forest. Although the majority of people in the Amazon live in cities and towns, there are still many indigenous groups living in the jungle, some who have had no contact with our "outside" world.

These people rely on the forest for their way of life. It provides almost everything from food and shelter to tools and medicines, as well as playing a crucial role in people's spiritual and cultural life. The people living in the forest make practical and sustainable use of the forest, and live within the constraints of this harsh environment. We have much to learn from their unique and valuable perceptions.

For instance, the Waimiri Atroari of the Brazilian Amazon use 32 plant species in the construction of hunting equipment alone. Each plant has a specific role according to its physical and chemical properties.

Yet the traditional way of life for indigenous Amazon cultures is being threatened.

As logging companies move in, indigenous people are losing their traditional territory. Some indigenous people, such as the Deni living in a remote area of Brazil's Amazonas state, are working not only to protect their culture, but the forest and the diversity of life upon which they depend.

The Amazon represents a last remote and pristine forest on our distressed and overcrowded planet. In addition to the remarkable intrinsic beauty and its myriad plant and animal species, it is clear that this diversity also represents a natural medicine chest.

Forest plants form the basis of primary healthcare for all forest-dwelling people. Dozens of species used by traditional medical practitioners now form the basis of pharmaceuticals used in modern medicine. Many powerful Amazon-sourced medicines have already been discovered and still more plants that hold out real hope for natural cures to life threatening diseases are left unexplored

The Amazon is an irreplaceable resource for all of humankind. The forest also plays a critical role in stabilising the climate which we all depend on.

The Amazon rainforest is vital for rainfall in the region as water is continually recycled through the Amazon forest by evaporation and rain. Destruction of the forest has already led to changes in the local climate with the possibility that further destruction will accelerate local and regional climatic change. The continued logging and burning of ancient forests is also contributing to climate change worldwide.



Amazon and its People: facts and figures

- The total area of the Amazon rainforest (over six million km² or 2.3 million square miles) is bigger than Western Europe and covers an area equivalent to two thirds of the US.
- The forest stretches over nine countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Guyana, Peru, Surinam and Venezuela. The largest part is contained within Brazil.
- The Amazon basin is the largest reservoir of fresh water on the planet and about one fifth of all running water on the planet flows through the Amazon.
- The Amazon river is 6,868 km or 4000 miles long. The same distance that separates New York from Berlin. It is almost two times the length of the Mississippi river (3744 km/2340 miles) and five times longer than the river Rhine (1312km/820 miles).
- During the rainy season from November to June, the main rivers in the Amazon flood vast areas of the forest. The flooded area can spread out up to 200 km from the riverbanks engulfing an area the size of England. In some rivers, the difference in the water level between wet and dry seasons is equal to the height of an eight-story building.
- Over 200 species of trees can be found in one hectare of Amazon rainforest. One tree has been shown to have 72 different species of ants living in it.
- There are about 30 times more fish species in the Amazon than in all European rivers.
- The Amazon river contains over 3000 rare aquatic species including two types of river dolphins, the giant otter, turtles and alligators.
- During the rainy season, the pink river dolphins move out of the main river and into the flooded forest where they can be seen swimming and hunting among the trees.
- Jaguars are the biggest cat in the western hemisphere and are known to be far-ranging. Movements of 500 miles have been recorded. Jaguars rarely attack humans, in fact, humans have a longer history hunting jaguars and the demand for their fur has led to a dramatic reduction in population.
- The sloth's vegetarian diet makes them very successful species in the forest and in many areas they are the most abundant larger mammal.
- As many as 150 million indigenous people live in ancient forests worldwide.
- The Brazilian Amazon is home to between 280,000 and 350,000 indigenous people, of which 180,000 live traditionally, heavily dependent on the ancient forest for their sustenance and spiritual and cultural life.
- In the Brazilian Amazon the last census determined that there are 20,998,731 people: 14,346,450 in villages, towns and cities, and 6,652,281 in rural areas.
- Caboclos, traditional forest dwellers of Amerindian and Portuguese descent, are also dependent on the jungle for food, shelter, tools and medicines.
- According to the anthropologist Darcy Riberio, 55 indigenous populations vanished in the first half of the 20th century.
- Manaus is the commercial centre of the Amazon region with a population of almost two million.