

The Ecological Importance of Amazon

The images of fires raging out of control in the Amazon are a powerful symbol of the way mankind continues to plunder and destroy nature. Of the world's original forests, only about one fifth remain untouched. One third of what is left is in the Amazonian countries.

Given the large scale logging and annual forest fires that have taken place in the Amazon over the last 30 years it is perhaps surprising that over 60 per cent of the original tropical rainforest in the Amazon remains intact and pristine.

The total area of Amazon rainforest (over 6 million km² / 2.3 million sq.miles) is bigger than Western Europe, covering an area equivalent to two thirds of the United States of America. The forest stretches to nine countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Guyana, Peru, Surinam and Venezuela.

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 / 4000 miles long, the same distance that separates New York from Berlin. It is almost two times the length of the Mississippi (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 rise (and) flood vast areas of the forest. The flooded area can spread out up to 200 kilometres from the river banks. In some rivers the difference in the water level between the wet and the dry season is equal to a building eight floors high.

During the floods river dolphins and fish are able to swim through the flooded forest. Indeed fish are one of the most important pollinators of the forest eating fruits from the trees of the forest and dispersing their seeds.

The Startling Diversity of Life

Amazon is one of the richest areas in the world in animal and plant diversity. There are more plant species in one hectare in Amazon than the whole of Europe. Over 200 species of trees can be found on one hectare of Amazon and one tree has been shown to have 72 different species of ants living in it. There are about 30 times more fish species in Amazon than in European rivers.

The diversity and contrast of life in Amazon is startling. The Amazon Water Lily (Vitoria-Regia) is the biggest flower in the world with a diameter of two meters. The caranguejeira spider is bigger than a baseball and one species of monkey weighing 130 grams is about the size of a toothbrush.

Yet, the range of plant and animal species in Amazon remains largely unknown. Scientists estimate that only 40 per cent of all insect species have so far been identified. Over 30,000 species of plants have been identified so far but another 20, 000 are estimated to remain undiscovered. Only during the 1990's seven species of monkeys, two species of birds and dozens of species of frogs and fish have been discovered.

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 microclimate with the possibility that further destruction will accelerate micro and regional climatic change. Furthermore, the continuing logging and burning of the forest is contributing to climate change and global warming.

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