

Can the Amazon Be Saved?

Paradise Lost?

The Amazon rain forest is disappearing at an alarming rate.



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Toucans and other creatures hold on as their rain forest home disappears.

Bright-colored toucans and other exotic birds fly among the forest. Emerald tree boas curl up on branches to stalk prey. Endangered jaguars slink through the thick brush in search of food. These are just a few of the thousands of animals that call the Amazon rain forest home.

A tropical rain forest is warm and has heavy rainfall. The Amazon, in South America, is the largest rain forest in the world.

Yet the Amazon's future is grim. Farmers are rapidly destroying this lush landscape. Deforestation has been a huge problem in the Amazon since the 1960s. Deforestation occurs when farmers and loggers cut down trees to make room for farms, homes, and roads. Until recently, scientists thought the rain forest was losing about 5,800 square miles a year. However, using the latest satellite technology, researchers have discovered that the Amazon is shrinking at about twice that rate.

Cause for Concern

Why should we worry about a rain forest that is thousands of miles from where we live? Deforestation reduces the rain forest's biodiversity, or the variety of plants and animals in a particular area. The Amazon is one of the richest areas of the world in animal and plant diversity. It is home to the biggest flower in the world, a bird-eating spider, and a monkey about the size of a toothbrush.

Scientists estimate that they have identified only a small number of all species that live in the rain forest. As loggers and farmers destroy the forest, animals and plants may become extinct before they are discovered.



Leigh Haeger

Map of South America

Deforestation affects people too. Many of the foods, spices, and medicines we need come from the rain forest.

The Amazon is often called the "lungs of the world." Its trees clean the air by taking in carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. Too much carbon dioxide in the air is harmful to humans. Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas. Greenhouse gases trap the sun's heat close to Earth. Without the trees in the rain forest, the Earth's climate would become much hotter.

Fixing the Problem

Stopping the destruction of the rain forest is not an easy task. Brazil's government created two national parks in the Amazon rain forest. The government's efforts placed 3.7 million acres of rain forest off-limits for development. The protected area is more than twice the size

of Maryland.

Others think that this is not enough. "The single most important factor contributing to forest loss is population growth in Brazil," scientist Jim Bowyer of the University of Michigan told *Weekly Reader*. "People make the forest their home. All these people need land for farming and wood for heat and cooking. They are looking for a way to survive."

Scientists estimate that if deforestation continues at its current rate, the rain forest may survive only another 40 to 50 years. "We need to address the real causes of deforestation, like poverty and population growth," says Bowyer. "Solutions need to involve the very people who destroy the forest."

