



The Amazon Rainforest

The Amazon rainforest is the **largest remaining tropical rainforest in the world**, blanketing the Earth's surface in approximately **three billion trees**. Spanning nine countries in South America, the Amazon is an expansive and incredibly diverse biome— almost twenty-five times the size of the United Kingdom. Through the region snakes the Amazon River, flowing for more than 4,100 miles.

- One fifth of world's flowing water runs through the Amazon.
- About 20% of the planet's oxygen is produced in the Amazon.

Biodiversity in the Amazon

As of 2005, the Amazon is home to at least **10% of the entire planet's known species**, including, at least:

- 437 mammal species
- 1,300 bird species
- 378 reptile species
- 400 amphibian species
- 3,000 fish species
- 40,000 to 53,000 tree species

These numbers don't include the **new animal or plant species that are catalogued approximately every two days in the region**. Nor do they take into account the **significant losses in biodiversity** caused by deforestation.

Cultural Diversity in the Amazon

- Nearly **400 distinct indigenous peoples**, composing 9% (2.7 million) of the Amazon's population, inhabit the region.
- These populations are made up of roughly **350 different ethnic groups**.
- Many indigenous Amazon nations have lost their land to deforestation and development. Many live on land that governments do not officially recognize as theirs and so their claims to the land, that they have inhabited for generations, are not respected.
- Not only are indigenous nations losing physical land, but the land they do still live on is often **polluted by mining and oil extraction**. Mining often leads to mercury poisoning, as well as a myriad of other health effects.
- Indigenous peoples are struggling for rights to their land, often through peaceful demonstrations and campaigns against the polluting company. These actions have resulted in **targeted arrests and prosecutions, and even loss of life**.

Why is the Amazon important to all of us?

The Amazon is essential to its local inhabitants and also to life all over the planet.

- Amazon trees account for about a quarter of the carbon dioxide absorbed by the earth each year, making it **a major planetary carbon sink** – the Amazon trees account for a quarter of carbon dioxide absorbed by the land annually. This, however, is changing fast as the Amazon passes its saturation point for carbon.
- The Amazon's forests produce massive amounts of oxygen; estimates say that the region generates **more than 20% of the earth's oxygen**.
- The region's forests **pump 20 billion tons of water into the atmosphere every day**. In Brazil, 70% of water evaporation responsible for precipitation comes from the Amazon.
- The Amazon plays **a critical role in regulating the global climate**, through its absorption of carbon and emission of water.

What are the biggest threats to the Amazon?

- **Deforestation** is one of the biggest threats to the Amazon. It is estimated that the region is losing 18.7 million acres of forests annually— That's the equivalent of **27 soccer fields every minute**. Deforestation takes place during logging, but also when portions of the Amazon are cleared for ranching and agricultural use. Estimates show that at least **20% of the Amazon rainforest has been deforested**.
- **Exploitative energy development** in the Amazon— mainly in the form of oil drilling and large hydroelectric dams— have also resulted in widespread deforestation, the destruction of aquatic habitats, and the inundation of the planet's atmosphere with additional carbon, not to mention the displacement of indigenous peoples and other land-based communities.
- **Mining** releases harmful chemicals into the Amazon biome and areas beyond the region.
- **Road building** is also a major threat to the Amazon. A 2014 study confirmed that 95% of all Amazon deforestation occurs within 5.5 kilometers of a road. Roads not only disrupt the natural ecosystem and habitats of organisms in the forest, but **threaten the security of protected areas and open access to the forest for loggers, miners, and migrants**.
- These threats to the Amazon also have a **destructive impact on indigenous communities**. Communities are **forced to fight for the land** they have lived on for generations, as governments and companies wreak havoc on their ways of life.