

The Amazon Rainforest and the Five themes

Brazil

Brazil has a varied landscape. The world's largest tropical rain forest sprawls across much of the north. The mighty Amazon and other enormous rivers wind through this vast green area of towering trees and steamy jungles. Cloud-capped mountains rise north of the forests and border the Atlantic Ocean in the southeast. Dry plains extend across parts of northeastern Brazil. The low plateaus of central and southern Brazil have fertile farmlands and lush grazing areas. Broad white beaches line glistening seashores on the nation's long Atlantic coast.

The forests, rivers and mountains of Brazil have restricted inland travel, and the country's vast interior remains little developed. About 80 per cent of all Brazilians live within 200 miles (320 kilometers) of the Atlantic coast. Nearly all of Brazil's big cities and towns are located on or near the coast. One of the largest cities in Brazil's interior is Brasilia. Brasilia is also the capital of the country. The city was built about 600 miles (970 kilometers) from the coast in order to help draw Brazilians inland.

Approximately three fourths of Brazil's people live in urban areas. About 10 metropolitan areas in the country have populations of more than a million. Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are the country's two largest cities. Sao Paulo has about 11 million people and is one of the largest cities in the world in terms of population. This modern, fast-paced city is also Brazil's chief commercial and industrial center. Rio de Janeiro has about 6 million people and is one of the 'most heavily populated cities in South America. Rio de Janeiro is a major tourist attraction. The city is known throughout the world for its breathtaking coastline, exciting nightclubs, and colorful festivals.

Brazil's people come from many backgrounds. About 60 per cent of the country's population are of European ancestry—mostly German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. Blacks make up about 7 per cent of the population. Indians, the original Brazilians,

form less than 1 per cent of Brazil's people. Most other Brazilians have mixed ancestry.

Rich natural resources have helped make Brazil a growing economic power. The nation is the world's largest "coffeepot," producing about a fourth of the total coffee crop each year. Brazil ranks among the world's leading countries in the production of a wide variety of agricultural items, including bananas, cacao beans, cattle, corn, cotton, horses, lemons, oranges, pineapples, rice, sheep, soybeans, sugar cane, and tobacco. Huge supplies of nuts, timber, and other products come from its forests, and power plants on its rivers generate a great amount of electricity. Brazil produces large quantities of iron ore, manganese, and many other minerals needed by industry.

The Amazon Rainforest

Amazon rain forest is the world's largest tropical rain forest. It covers approximately 2 million square miles (5.2 million square kilometers) in the Amazon River Basin of South America. About two-thirds of the rain forest lies in Brazil. The forest also occupies parts of Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. The Amazon rain forest receives an average annual rainfall of 50 to 175 inches (113 to 445 centimeters). Temperatures average about 81°F (27°C).

Trees in most of the Amazon rain forest grow in several distinct layers. Some trees, called emergents, tower above the rest of the forest and may reach heights of 130 feet (40 meters). The upper canopy generally grows 82 to 100 feet (25 to 30 meters) high. Plants called epiphytes, or air plants, thrive in this layer. They include aroids, bromeliads, ferns, liverworts, mosses, and orchids. One or two lower canopies consist of saplings of the trees found in the upper canopy, in addition to smaller trees and shrubs. Lianas (woody vines) wind around tree trunks and branches, extending from the ground to the upper canopy. The canopies receive sunlight. However, they prevent much light from reaching the forest floor. Most of the Amazon rain forest has infertile soil.

The Amazon rain forest contains a wider variety of plant and animal life than any other place in the world. Tens of thousands of different plant species live

there. A 2 1/2-acre (1 hectare) area of the rain forest may contain up to 280 or more species of trees. Many economically important plants live in the rain forest. They yield such products as Brazil nuts, cocoa, curare (an important drug), pineapples, and rubber. More than 1,500 species of birds make their homes in the rain forest. The region's rivers contain up to 3,000 species of fish. In addition, scientists believe that as many as 30 million different insect species may live, in the forest.

Amazon rain forest. Many of these people depend on the forest to support themselves.

People and the rain forests.

Through the years, few people have dwelt in tropical rain forests. Most such people clear small areas and plant crops there. They chop down the trees, burn them, and plant seeds among the ashes. But after a few years, the thin layer of soil no longer provides good harvests. The farmers then move elsewhere and begin the process all over again. Such farming, called slash-and-burn cultivation, can support only a small population.

A few groups of rain forest people practice no agriculture. For example, the Pygmies of the Central African rain forest live by hunting wild animals, gathering wild plants, and trading with agricultural tribes.

Today, the rapid growth of the world population and the increasing demands for natural resources threaten many tropical rain forests. People have destroyed large areas of rain forests by clearing land for farms and cities. Huge mining, ranching, and timber projects also have caused much damage. Scientists estimate that as many as 50 million acres (20 million hectares) of tropical rain forests are destroyed yearly. They fear that further forest destruction will lead to the elimination of hundreds of thousands of species of plants and animals.

Areas of the rain forest that have been cleared can regenerate. However, regenerated areas are much less diverse than the original forest. About 10 percent of the Amazon rain forest has been destroyed. Development, deforestation (the destruction of forests), and gold mining also threaten the culture of the few remaining native peoples of the