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Rain Forests

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Full Text:



A temperate rain forest in the Pacific Northwest.

Joe Sohm/Pan America/Jupiterimages.

Rain forests are temperate or tropical forests. They have a humid climate, with at least 100 inches (254 centimeters) of rain each year. There is no dry season in rain forests. They cover only 6 percent of the earth's surface, but rain forests are the richest and most diverse habitats on Earth. Many plant and animal species live there.

Parts of a Rain Forest

A rain forest is divided into different parts, each with plants and animals adapted for life in that particular area. The emergent layer contains the trees that are much taller than the average trees in the forest. Eagles, bats, butterflies, and monkeys live here. The canopy is the layer of the forest where the treetops are. The understorey, or shrub layer, is the space between the canopy and the forest floor. It is home to predators such as leopards and jaguars, as well as birds, snakes, and lizards. Only about five percent of the sunlight in the rain forest reaches the understorey. At ground level is the forest floor, which is dark and humid. It receives only two percent of the sunlight in the forest and contains decaying plant and animal matter, which disappears quickly due to warm, humid conditions that promote rapid decay. Many forms of fungi grow here.

Tropical and Temperate

There are two kinds of rain forests. They are tropical rain forests and temperate rain forests. Tropical rain forests are located near the equator in Central and South America. They have a thick forest canopy filled with animals and plants. The jungles and swamps are famous for tropical birds such as parrots. The Amazon jungle in South America is the world's largest tropical rain forest. It covers 1.2 billion acres (486,000 hectares). The second largest tropical rain forest is in Central Africa.

Temperate rain forests are most commonly located on the windward side of coastal mountain ranges. Warm, moist wind blows from over the ocean to the west coasts of North and South America and New Zealand. In northern California, there is a coastal rain forest with giant redwood trees more than 1,000 years old.

Saving the Rain Forest

Rain forests are an important natural resource. Many foods such as cashew nuts and medicinal drugs come from tropical forests. Rain forests are also tourist destinations. But rain forests are rapidly shrinking in size because the large trees are being cut down for lumber, plywood, paper, and other wood products. Many people cut down the trees to create wide open spaces of land where they can raise cattle or grow sugarcane. Another

factor causing the loss of rain forests is expanding urban areas. When the trees are cut down, the wildlife disappears and plants, such as orchids, die. Biologists estimate that large numbers of species are being driven to extinction. More plants, animals, and insects are lost each day. Experts believe the rainforest could disappear in less than 40 years. Researchers are now working to protect the world's tropical rain forests and to preserve the diverse life they contain.

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