



## Earth's Resources

### GEOGRAPHY

### Rain Forests at Risk

*In just a few weeks in 1988, the vast rain forest around the Amazon River in South America lost one-twentieth of its area—an amount the size of Great Britain—to deforestation. The reading examines this trend, presents some consequences, and suggests ways that the problem might be challenged.*

The world's forests have been steadily shrinking since antiquity [ancient times]. Cut down largely to make way for fields and settlements, the woodlands of much of . . . Europe, North America, and Asia had been reduced to fragments by the turn of the century. Today, the frontier of deforestation has shifted to the tropics, especially to the . . . evergreen rain forests once known in the West as "jungle." These forests are being cleared at a devastating rate, causing a worldwide alarm.

Loss of the forests also leads to a loss of plant and animal life. The tropical forests are home to at least two-thirds of the world's species, most of them as yet unnamed and unknown to science. According to some estimates, thousands of these are becoming extinct every year. We will never know what we have missed.

Wild plants are a vital resource. Cocoa, coffee, bananas, and sugar cane have already been improved by cross-breeding with wild species in the forest. With one in four Western medicines based on forest plants, and so much of the forest still unexplored, the potential for developing new drugs is also enormous.

Deforestation commonly results in soil deterioration and erosion. The rainforest's luxuriant [lush and dense] vegetation may suggest that the soil is very fertile. It is not. In rain forests most nutrients are embodied [kept] in the living plants and animals, rather than held in reserve in the soil.

Each of the major rainforest regions is home to indigenous [native] peoples. As the forests are cleared, their territories are diminishing [shrinking]. Some are forced into new reserves, others simply have their land appropriated [taken over] and are left to survive as best they can. Their cultures are being extinguished, and many are dying from diseases like malaria, against which they have little defense. Some 500 years ago there may have been nine million Indians living in Amazonia [the region around the Amazon River]. Today there are fewer than 200,000.

Deforestation may also be contributing to climate change. At the regional level, forest loss means less rainfall. The Panama Canal, for instance, is already forced to restrict shipping flows because there is too little water to fill its dams. At a planetary level, things may be even more serious since the burning and removal of trees contributes to the build-up of greenhouse gases. About one-fifth of the extra carbon dioxide currently being added to the atmosphere results from forest clearance.

Despite the gravity of the problems, there are many encouraging signs. Concern for the forests, and their peoples, has been raised worldwide. Pressure is mounting on governments and corporations that benefit from the products of current or former rainforests.

In northern India, women of the Chipko movement have denied loggers access to valuable timber by hugging the trees, a stratagem [plan] that is spreading to other threatened forests of the world. A planned dam on Brazil's Xingu River was scrapped, thanks to concerted [determined] action by local Kayapo Indians. National parks are being established, and reforestation projects primed [readied]. There is even a suggestion to offer debt relief to countries that undertake to protect their forests. But time is running short.

Adaptation from "The Tropical Chain-Saw Massacre: Forests at Risk," (retitled "Rain Forest at Risk") from *The Real World*, edited by Bruce Marshall. Copyright ©1991 by Marshall Editions Limited. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

**Understanding What You Read** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What benefits do the rain forests provide to the production of the world's foods and medicines?

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2. Identify four problems that the author says can result from the destruction of the world's rain forests.

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3. Describe three trends that the author identifies as providing hope for the future of the rain forests.

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~~Activity~~

~~Design a poster that calls for saving the rain forests. Include an image and a slogan that will inspire others to support this cause.~~