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Mystical Maya Forests of Belize: Connections Between Rainforests and Aquatic Ecosystems

1. How many of you know what a rainforest is? And how many of you know what a manatee looks like? Can anyone think of the connection between rainforests and manatees? Well, in a country called Belize in Central America, we will learn about the special connection between manatees and rainforests.
2. Manatees are sometimes called sea cows, because they swim slowly through the water and eat grasses. Manatees are actually bigger than most cows. They can grow to more than 10 feet long and weigh about 1,000 pounds. That's nearly the size of a small car!
3. The West Indian manatee lives off the coast of Belize, swimming in the sea along the mangroves. But the manatee doesn't live there alone. Manatees share their environment with loggerhead turtles. Loggerheads swim out in the ocean for most of their lives. Then, once a year, the females return to the exact same beach where they were born to lay eggs in the sand.
4. The manatees and the turtles live in the waters near the coast. But what is the connection to rainforests?
5. Belize forms part of what scientists call the Selva Maya (or Maya Forest). The Maya Forest is the largest remaining chunk of forest in Central America. Now, why would that be important? It is important because the larger the forest is, the more species it can hold and the more likely that those animals and plants can be protected for many years to come.
6. The Selva Maya has many of the animals that you think of when someone says "rainforest." There are jaguars in the forest. They swim in the rivers and hunt small animals for food. Jaguars need a lot of space, so the rainforests of Belize are a very good place for them. Jaguars are fierce hunters, catching their prey from behind and tackling them with their powerful jaws. And, unfortunately, they have been widely hunted by cattle ranchers and poachers. In Belize, there is a reserve that was created just to help protect jaguars.
7. Along with the jaguars are other kinds of cats, like this ocelot. Ocelots look a lot like jaguars, because they have spots. But ocelots are much smaller than jaguars and spend a lot of their time in trees. Like jaguars, they are good swimmers. But they prefer to eat their food on the ground or in trees. They eat a wide variety of small animals, plus fish and birds.
8. These animals also spend most of their time in trees. These are howler monkeys, and just like their name, they make great howling noises that sound like a very loud wind. Howlers live in large groups in the trees and eat fruit and insects that they are able to find there.
9. The trees are where you will find most of the birds, too. These macaws stay at the top of the forest, called the canopy, where they can get a good view of things.
10. Rainforests are called that because they get a lot of rain. The rainforests in southern Belize get more than 100 inches of rain each year! (*compare to the annual rainfall in your area*) All that rain means the ground is very squishy with moss and fallen leaves. When you walk through the rainforest it feels like you are walking on sponges.
11. All the dead leaves and fallen fruit get recycled by millions of bugs. What do you think they do with the leaves? Surprisingly, they don't eat them. The ants use the leaves to provide nutrients to grow mushrooms underground in their colony. Then the ants eat the mushrooms. Some people say that leafcutter ants were the first true farmers.
12. Other insects, like this blue morpho butterfly, help pollinate the flowers that grow everywhere in the forest.
13. All of these great creatures, and so many more, live in the rainforests of Belize. But so do lots of people. The reason the forest is called the Maya Forest is that for thousands of years, the Maya people have lived there, using it for their food, medicines and building materials.
14. Today, the Maya people continue to make their living by using the forest. They clear small gardens to plant food for their families. Many of them raise chickens or pigs for their families to eat.
15. Many of the families who live in southern Belize are very poor. They live in small houses without running water or electricity.

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16. The Maya people of southern Belize also harvest many of the fruits and plants that grow in the forest. They take these products to market and sell them to people who live in the cities. Do any of you recognize any of the fruits or vegetables in this picture? The forest provides the people of Belize with thatch for their houses, oranges, bananas, guavas, plantains, cocoa (for making chocolate) and lots of other delicious things.
17. There is a great group of conservationists in Belize, called TIDE, which works with the people to help them find ways to make money without having to cut down more forest. TIDE believes that they can help people live better lives without destroying the forest. But making these decisions is not always easy. Conservationists need help in convincing communities that there are other ways to make money besides logging and intensive farming.
18. TIDE works with farmers to teach them ways that they can improve their farms and still protect wildlife. Most of the time the families who live near the forest don't want to cut down all the trees, but they don't know what else to do. By working together, TIDE is able to help them earn more money for their crops and still help to protect the forest.
19. This is important for the manatee because when the forest up on the mountains gets cut down, the rivers where the manatees live get murky from erosion. Erosion is when the soil gets washed away from the land by the rains. This happens because there are no trees and bushes to keep the soil in place.
20. Farmers also might be using chemicals—called pesticides—that can harm the fish and birds. These chemicals travel through the streams and down the mountain until they finally end up in the ocean where the manatees, fish and turtles depend on clean water for their food.
21. TIDE works with orange and banana farmers to help them prevent problems that can hurt wildlife—like erosion and pollution. This is important because lots of beautiful and special animals depend on the success of this project.
22. Along the coast, TIDE makes sure that fishermen obey the law and don't take too many fish. They patrol the protected areas and keep poachers (illegal hunters) out of the water. TIDE's patrols help to make sure that the mangroves and the cayes are safe for the many different types of animals, fish and birds that depend on them.
23. The children who live around the Selva Maya forest and the Port Honduras coastal reserve are learning what an important place their home is. They are learning that together they can help to protect all the animals. Each of us has to learn, just like them, how to care for our environment. Every place is different and each is special.