

Living in the Amazon Forest: The People of Boa Vista do Ramos

1. Cover slide
2. How many of you have heard of the Amazon rainforest? (*raise hands*) The Amazon rainforest is the largest in the world. It covers an area almost one-third the size of the United States. But while most people think of the exotic animals, trees and insects that live in the forest, there are also more than 20 million people living there, too! That's about the same number of people that live in Los Angeles. Or twice as many people as in New York City. And almost all of the people who live in the Amazon rainforest have moved there in the last 20 years. So, today we are going to learn about one town, Boa Vista do Ramos, in Brazil's Amazon rainforest. We will learn about what the people are doing to try to live without destroying the forest. And we will learn a little about what you can do to help them.
3. The Amazon rainforest covers parts of Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia and the Guianas (Suriname, French Guiana and Guyana). But the vast majority of the Amazon is in Brazil—South America's largest country. Brazil is almost the same size as the US, but has about half as many people. Boa Vista do Ramos, which means “good view of the branches” in Portuguese, is a town in the northern part of the Amazon, several hours by river from Manaus, the largest city in the Amazon. The town of Boa Vista is on the Rio Blanco, which means the White River in Portuguese. The White River joins the Rio Negro (or Black River) before reaching Manaus. The rivers have these names because they carry minerals that change the color of the water.
4. The Amazon basin is mostly flat. There are not many big mountains. The water that falls in the forests and in the mountains that surround the forest to the north and west flows slowly toward the Atlantic Ocean via hundreds of small, medium and large rivers. In fact, the Amazon River is the largest river in the world. At its widest point, the river stretches almost 100 miles across. Imagine trying to cross that! The Amazon rainforest is roughly three billion acres in size—about the size of Western Europe. Scientists believe that about 7–8 million acres of forest is being cut down each year. This is the same as losing 12 football fields per minute of forest! The Amazon is full of trees. In the Amazon, you can find over 300 different species of trees in an area the size of a city block! Many of these trees would have taken dozens of years to reach their full height, with canopies that can reach 200 feet into the air. The tops of the trees are filled with birds, insects and plants that need the sunlight that is only found at the top of the forest. Because there is so much rainfall in the Amazon (6–12 feet each year!), certain parts of the forest are flooded by rivers during the wettest months. The trees in these areas are able to spend months with their trunks underwater. Most of these areas will dry out as the rivers recede, while others remain flooded nearly all year.
5. Although most people think about all the animals that live in the forest on land, the Amazon actually has an amazing variety of animals and fish that live in its rivers. Here is an Amazon river dolphin. Sometimes these dolphins are called “pink dolphins” because as they get older, their skin turns a pink color. Unlike their cousins in the ocean, these dolphins swim only in freshwater. And Amazon river dolphins are the largest species of freshwater dolphin in the world, growing to more than 10 feet long and weighing over 200 pounds. In the waters below the forest there is room for lots of animals to live. The rivers of the Amazon have over 3,000 species of fish. Not to mention all the turtles!
6. But not all of the interesting animals live under water. The Amazon is full of beautiful birds, like this toucan. Toucans have enormous beaks for eating fruits and nuts. You might be asking, “But with that big beak, how can the toucan fly?” Well, a toucan's beak is hollow so that it won't weigh him down. Imagine if your nose were four times as big as your head, like his. Toucans live in the hollows of old trees, like owls. And toucans, like many birds, play a key role in helping to keep the forest growing by eating fruit and depositing the seeds to grow into new trees.
7. But birds aren't the only ones eating all the good stuff that grows on trees in the Amazon! Capuchin monkeys, like these two, can be found in tropical forests throughout Central and South America, including the Amazon. These monkeys don't just lie around in trees all day. They eat flowers, leaves and nuts from trees, and even the occasional small animal. They live in large groups, called troops, of 20–30 monkeys.

Slideshow Script

2

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8. This bald-headed uakari is a good example of one of the many species that are only found in the Amazon. When a species is found only in one place it is called endemic, which tells you that an animal or plant can only be found in that place. The red uakari is endemic to the northern Amazonian flooded forest, where they stay mostly in the trees. And, as you can see, they sometimes hang upside-down to get really yummy fruit! The uakari, with its bright red face and white fur, would stick out anywhere. But in the rainforest, lots of animals have bright colors. Can you think of why it might be useful to be so colorful in the forest? (*bright colors can help individuals of the same species to find each other in the dense forest*)
9. In the areas of the forest that don't flood with water, you can find lots of species of animals combing the forest floor in search of food. This tapir eats mostly grass and leaves. She will wander around looking for tender young leaves on the most nutritious bushes and young grasses. Tapirs are very big. They can grow to over eight feet long and live for an average of 25 years. Their biggest problem is avoiding hunters—not just jaguars, but also humans. Some people use their skins to make leather.
10. Jaguars, like this one, have lots of competition for their food. Jaguars are the top predators in the forest—they hunt for and eat small, medium and large animals. But when people come into the forest and hunt all the animals, it gets harder for the jaguar to find food. Unfortunately, sometimes the hunters are not just there to take the jaguar's food. Jaguars are also hunted for their furs and because people believe they are dangerous. Cattle ranchers will often have any jaguar on their land shot in order to protect their cows. So jaguars must be very careful about where they go, creeping quietly along the forest floor.
11. These guys are anything but quiet! These blue and yellow macaws, and other macaw species, are famous for creating a racket in the forest. Macaws let out loud calls over the forest as they fly from one perch to the next. Macaws have very strong beaks that they use to break open hard shells and to dig in the clay soils along the riverbanks. They make nests high up in hollowed-out trees, like this one.
12. Most of the forest is actually filled with things that rarely get noticed—insects. Hundreds of different species of ants can be found in the Amazon. Some of them, like leafcutter ants, tear up and use leaves that fall to the forest floor. They don't eat the leaves. Instead, leafcutters use the leaves to grow a fungus (like a mushroom) that they can eat. Other insects, like bees, help the many species of orchids in the rainforest. In the Amazon, each different orchid species requires a different species of bee to pollinate it. Each species depends on the other to survive. Just like the people of Boa Vista do Ramos depend on the forest to survive...
13. For thousands of years, most of the people that lived in the area of Boa Vista do Ramos were native people. The Yanomami have a very close relationship with the forest. While they do hunt and fish and use plants from the forest for food and medicine, the Yanomami were so few that their impact did not permanently scar the forest. The Yanomami continue to live in the Amazon rainforest, but most have left the area around Boa Vista because a new group of people has started to arrive—settlers. Along many of the major rivers in the Amazon, you will find villages like this. Beginning about 25 years ago, people began moving to the Amazon in search of better lives. The Brazilian government would often give them free land there in order to get poor people out of the crowded cities. Unfortunately, many of the people who moved to the forest didn't know anything about how to use the forest's plants and animals without destroying the forest. These new settlers often have very damaging jobs, like logging, hunting and mining for gold and other precious minerals.
14. These are not mean people who *want* to destroy the forest. They are families who are just trying to feed their children, earn a living and find a better life. How many of you could eat and have a house if neither of your parents worked? The same is true for the children who live in Boa Vista. Their parents work hard to take care of their families. Luckily, the families of Boa Vista are getting some help from people who care about the forest. Help that will allow them to improve their lives without destroying their piece of the Amazon. The people who live in Boa Vista have very different lives than you do. For instance, almost none of the houses have electricity. There are almost no roads—all transportation is by boat up and down river. The families cook their food over wood that they must gather from the forest,

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because there is no other way to prepare food. But in other ways, their lives are very much like yours.

15. The children of Boa Vista attend school five days a week, just like you. Their classrooms are a little bit different. They have no computers. The children learn in Portuguese, the official language of Brazil. They learn history, math, science, reading and writing skills, and they learn something very interesting—how to take care of the rainforest.
16. Some of the children's parents used to cut down trees in the forest to sell to timber companies. Certain trees, like mahogany, from these forests are used to make very expensive furniture and other wood products that sell in the United States and around the world. Selling these trees can help the family pay for things they need. But when they cut down all the big, old trees from a forest, this doesn't leave anywhere for the plants and animals to live.
17. By working with Imaflo, a partner of the Rainforest Alliance, families in Boa Vista are learning that they can take only a few of the most valuable trees from the forest. This provides them with the money they need for their families, while leaving most of the forest for the animals. And in a few years, as the trees grow back, more trees can be sold. Cutting down only a few, carefully selected trees at a time is called sustainable forestry—leaving the forest healthy for many years to come.
18. And there are lots of other things that families can do to make money without destroying the forest. Some families are learning how to catch fish that they can sell in the cities. The fishermen use simple nets and pay careful attention to avoid taking too many fish from the river.
19. Life in the Amazon is hard. The families who live in Boa Vista must depend on the forest and the river for everything they need: food, medicine, money and even transportation.
20. The families in Boa Vista are learning how to be gentle to the forest. By working with conservationists, people who help protect nature, they are discovering that rainforests are special places. These places need our help to make sure they are around forever.