

Living in the Chocó Forests of Ecuador: The Chachi Cocoa Farmers

1. I'm sure most of you have tried chocolate, but does anyone know where chocolate comes from? Chocolate comes from cocoa trees that grow in the rainforest, such as the Chocó forests of Ecuador. Today we are going to learn about the rainforests of Ecuador, and the plants, animals and people who live there. More than 13,000 people live in Ecuador. We'll learn all about the people called the Chachi Indians, who live in the community of Esmeraldas in the Chocó forests. The Chachi live off of the resources that the forest provides, and are trying to keep these forests from being cut down. We'll also see how the choices we make—even the chocolate we eat—can help keep the Chachis' home alive.
2. Ecuador is located in the northwest part of South America and is about the same size as the state of Nevada. It is one of the most geographically diverse countries in South America, because the Amazon rainforest, the Galapagos Islands and the Andes are all located there. It is bordered by the Pacific coast, and the countries Colombia and Peru. Does Ecuador sound like another word you know? It was named for the equator, the imaginary circle around the middle of the Earth's surface that divides the Earth into the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere. Ecuador contains the one spot on the Earth, Mount Chimborazo, that is closest to the sun! You can imagine how warm it can get in some parts of Ecuador.
3. Ecuador's location and climate make it an ideal place for rainforests to grow. The rainforests are both beautiful and important because they are home to thousands of different plant and animal species, and are also home to many people who use the rainforest for food, shelter, medicine and fuel. The Chocó forests, located along the northern coast of Ecuador, are home to over 9,000 plant and animal species, including more than 800 bird species, 235 species of mammals and 210 reptile species! The thick forest of trees, the canopy (which is the layer of leaves and branches at the tops of the trees), and the heavy rainfall make this place a perfect home for these animals.
4. Some of the animals that live in the rainforest include the four-eyed opossum, pacas, ocelots, jaguarundi and coati. You can see and hear many birds in the rainforest, such as the mealy parrot, the Chocó toucan, blue-gray tanager, tropical kingbird, squirrel cuckoo, rufous-tailed hummingbird and the ringed kingfisher. Each of these animals and birds plays an important role in the rainforest, and many animals and birds are now becoming endangered because people are cutting down the rainforests. Ninety six percent of the Chocó forests have already been destroyed!
5. Howler monkeys and capuchin monkeys like the ones seen here also live in the rainforests of Ecuador. Howler monkeys like to hang out in big groups of about 10 to 18 monkeys. They are herbivores, which means they eat the fruit and leaves of plants. And howler monkeys do howl! The males howl to communicate with other monkey groups to defend their territory. Capuchins also hang out in large groups of 10 to 20 monkeys. They like to stay in the canopy of the forest and eat things like fruits, leaves, berries, insects and even eggs.
6. The Chocó forest also supports a coastal mangrove system. A mangrove is a woody plant, or a group of these plants, that grows between the land and the sea, along the shore. Mangroves are very important because they filter the water, prevent erosion and protect the land from tropical storms. They are also home to many species of birds, fish and wildlife. The branches of the mangrove trees make perfect homes for birds, because they can hide from predators and also be close to the shore for food.
7. While there are thousands of different kinds of animals that live in the Chocó forests, many people live and around these forests as well. The Chachi Indians of Esmeraldas need these forests to survive. The forest is like their supermarket. The Chachi people can get food, medicine and fuel for fire from the forests. The forests provide the Chachi with food such as mangos, papayas, citrus and guava. They also eat food from the mangroves such as shrimp, crab and fish.
8. Young Chachi Indians help with crops, doing chores and gathering fruits from the Chocó forest. These Chachi boys are gathering bananas and other fruits from the forest. Some of these fruits will be taken home for their families to eat, and many of them will be sold in the bigger cities in Ecuador. It is a lot of work to harvest the fruit of the forest, but the Chachi Indians survive by using the forest's resources and

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working hard to grow and gather these many plants.

9. Young boys and girls of the Chachi Federation go to school, too. The Chachi speak Chapalachi, but their books in school are written in Spanish so they learn two languages! This young boy goes to school and also does chores, like cutting firewood, on his family's farm in the city of San Salvador.
10. One very important plant that grows in the Chocó forests is the cocoa or cacao tree. It may be hard to picture, but chocolate comes from these cocoa trees, which grow under the forest canopy. The fruit of the cocoa tree grows in large pods that hang from the trunk and branches of the tree. When the pods are cut open, you can see the white cocoa fruit, which tastes a little like chocolate. Inside this white fruit are dark purple seeds, and this is where we get our chocolate from! In this picture, you can see what these seeds look like.
11. The Chachi Indians not only use the plants in the rainforest for food, they also use the water in the rainforest and the mangroves for transportation. A canoe is a very good way to carry cocoa seeds and fruits down the river. In some places near the Chocó forest there are no roads, so the Chachi have to canoe down to the roads to go into the bigger cities, where they can sell their cocoa.
12. Cocoa farms grown in the shade of the rainforest canopy provide a great habitat for wildlife. These types of crops, grown in the forest without cutting down the trees that shade them, are a good way to grow things like cocoa because they leave habitat for the rainforest animals. The cocoa trees seen here are grown in the shade, and are harvested by the Chachi Indians. The Chachi want to continue growing cocoa in the shade of the forest because they realize that the forest is very important to their lives, and the lives of people everywhere.
13. Many people do cut down trees in the Chocó forest of Ecuador. Some people cut down trees to sell to companies to make furniture or paper products, and some cut them down to make room to grow crops. For some families, this is how they make enough money to buy food, but people like the Chachi know that there are other ways to grow crops and earn money for their families.
14. The Chachi Indians want to continue to harvest cocoa in a way that does not destroy the rainforest so that the plants and animals will always have a place to live. They grow cocoa in the shade so that they can keep the rainforests standing. This means that they grow crops in the rainforest, instead of cutting down the trees to make room for their crops. The Chachi are working together with Conservación y Desarrollo (or Conservation and Development), a partner group of the Rainforest Alliance, to learn ways to dry and store the cocoa seeds better, so they can get more money for them when they are sold. By learning from this organization, the Chachi can continue to practice sustainable forestry, which means that the forest will be able to provide them with food, medicine and fuel long into the future.
15. The rainforest is not just a beautiful place—it is a home to plants, animals and people. It provides us with countless resources. By learning about how we can use the rainforest in a way that doesn't destroy it, we—and our children and even our children's children—can enjoy these beautiful forests and the many things that originate in the rainforest for many years to come.