

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE RAINFOREST

Q: Who are indigenous people?

A: Tropical rainforests are bursting with life. Not only do millions of species of plants and animals live in rainforests, but many people also call the rainforest home. In fact, indigenous, or native, peoples have lived in rainforests for thousands of years. Today, thousands of distinct indigenous groups with their own languages and cultures still live in tropical rainforests around the world.

Q: In general, how do they live?

A: Although some indigenous people live much as we do, others still live much as their ancestors did thousands of years ago. In many cases indigenous peoples rely on the rainforest for food, medicine, and clothing.

Q: Do the children go to school?

A: Most tribal children don't go to schools like ours. Instead, they learn about the

forest from their parents and other people in their community. They are taught how to survive in the forest. They learn how to hunt and fish, and which plants are useful as medicines or food. Some of these children know more about rainforests than scientists who have studied rainforests for many years!

Q: What do they find to eat?

A: Besides hunting, gathering wild fruits and nuts, and fishing, some indigenous people also plant small gardens, using a sustainable farming method called shifting cultivation.

First they clear a small area of land and burn it. Then they plant many types of plants to be used for food and medicines. After a while, the soil becomes too poor to allow for more crops to grow. The farmers then move to a nearby uncleared area to farm. Cleared land is allowed to regrow for 10-50 years before it is farmed again. Shifting cultivation is still practiced by those indigenous groups that have access to large



amounts of land. However, with the growing number of non-indigenous farmers in the rainforest and the shrinking size of the rainforest, some people are now forced to farm in one area instead of moving around. Because the land cleared for farming does not have time to regrow, it eventually becomes a wasteland and can no longer be used for farming.

Q: Why is the forest so important to indigenous people?

A: Indigenous people rely on the rainforest for food, medicine, shelter, and clothing. They live what is called a sustainable existence, meaning they use the land without doing harm to the plants and animals that also call the rainforest their home. As a wise indigenous man once said, “The earth is our historian, our educator, the provider of food, medicine, clothing and protection. She is the mother of our races.”

Q: Why are indigenous peoples in danger?

A: When the first European explorers arrived in Latin America, they brought with them diseases such as small-pox, measles, and even the common cold. Europeans were used to these illnesses so they didn’t get sick, but indigenous peoples had never been exposed to these diseases before so many of them became sick and died. This disaster was repeated in many other parts of the world.

Since then many indigenous groups have been killed or driven off on their land by settlers or by large companies that want the indigenous people’s land. However, until

about forty years ago, the lack of roads in rainforests prevented most outsiders from entering the rainforest and indigenous territories. Now, roads constructed for timber and oil companies have opened up vast rainforest areas to outsiders.

Although indigenous people have lived on their lands for thousands of years, in most cases they do not legally own it because they have not filed the necessary papers. Therefore governments and other outsiders do not recognize their rights to the land. Sometimes indigenous peoples are forced to move to different areas, sometimes even to the crowded cities. This is difficult for them because they have no skills useful for a city lifestyle and little knowledge about the urban culture. For example, they know more about gathering food from the forest than buying food from a store. Imagine being forced to move to a different country, where you know nothing about the culture or language!

Q: What are indigenous people doing to save their territory?

A: Indigenous groups are beginning to fight for their land, most often through peaceful demonstrations. Such actions may put them in danger, but they know that if they take no action their land and culture could be lost forever. Many people living outside of rainforests want to help protect the indigenous people’s culture. They understand that indigenous people have much to teach us about rainforests. By working with these groups, we can learn important information about rainforests—its medicinal plants, foods, and rainforest ecology (see glossary).

Q: Why should we care about the fate of indigenous peoples?

A: Indigenous peoples have a right to practice their own lifestyle, and to live upon the land where their ancestors have lived before them. In addition, indigenous peoples possess an enormous body of almost irreplaceable information and skills about the rainforest, and about living in the rainforest without destroying it.

In the 19th Century, miners used to carry canaries into the mines with them because the birds were highly sensitive to toxic gases. If the birds died, it warned the miners that they too would die unless they fled. The rainforests and their inhabitants have been compared to the miner's canary. If the rainforests and all the animals and people living the rainforests die, then we will be in danger too. That is one of the many reasons why it is important for us to respect indigenous cultures and to do whatever we can to help preserve the rainforests.

Glossary

Culture: the total aspects of a group of people's lives, such as art, music and food, that make this group unique.

Ecology: the study of the relationships between living things and their environments.

Exploit: to use something, especially for profit, without considering the consequences or damaging results.

Indigenous: the first, or original living things (people, animals, plants) of a certain area, prior to its transformation by civilization.

Sustainable: using products of the forest in a way that does not permanently destroy them, so that people in the future can also use them.

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