

Geography Alive! Chapter 12

Land Use Conflict in the Amazon Rainforest

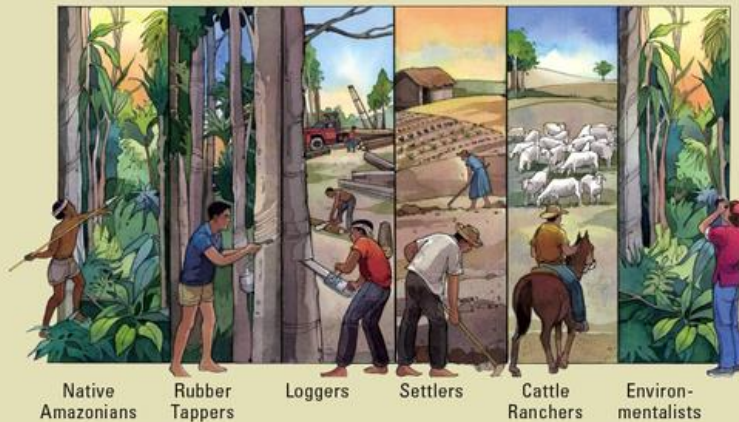
12.1 Introduction

Essential Question

How should the resources of rainforests be used and preserved?

This illustration shows six groups that are interested in the Amazon rainforest. Some want to use the resources of the rainforest to make a living. Others want to preserve the rainforest in its natural state. Keep the possible conflicts among these groups in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.

Graphic Organizer



Picture yourself in a hot, steamy forest. It has just stopped raining. Everything around you is green and moist. Green vines wind around the slender trunks of trees that reach more than 100 feet into the air. High overhead, a tangle of vines, branches, and leaves nearly blocks out the sun. Except for the buzzing of insects, the forest is nearly silent. Then you hear a strange barking sound coming from the treetops. You look up and get your first glimpse of a red howler monkey.

Welcome to the Amazon rainforest, a huge [tropical rainforest](#) in South America. The rainforest seems timeless, yet it is changing rapidly. For thousands of years, small groups of [indigenous peoples](#) have made their home here. These native Amazonians live by hunting and gathering. In more recent times, other groups have come to the rainforest. They include rubber tappers, farmers, cattle ranchers, and loggers. In addition, the rainforest is of great interest to environmental groups. These are organizations that work to protect the natural world.

Each of these groups has its own ideas about the Amazon rainforest. Some want to use the rainforest to make a living. Others want to preserve it in its natural state. These differences have led to [land use conflict](#), or arguments about the best ways to use the land. In this chapter, you will learn what the different groups want. You will also learn about possible solutions to land use conflict in the Amazon rainforest.

12.2 The Geographic Setting

Tropical rainforests are a type of [broadleaf evergreen forest](#). They are found near the equator, where the [climate](#) is warm and wet all year. The Amazon rainforest is the largest tropical rainforest in the world. It covers more than 2 million square miles. That is more than half the size of the United States! Most of this vast rainforest lies in Brazil. It also covers parts of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Venezuela.

A Many-Layered Ecosystem A rainforest is a complex [ecosystem](#) with many layers. The bottom, or ground, layer is the [forest floor](#). The thick layer of overlapping tree branches at the very top of the forest is called the [canopy](#). Between the forest floor and the canopy is a layer of shrubs and smaller trees. This layer is called the [lower story](#).

An amazing variety of plants and animals live in the various layers of the rainforest. Rainforests cover about 6 percent of the Earth's surface. But they are home to about 50 percent of the world's living things.

Scientists use the term **biodiversity** to describe the variety of plants and animals living in one area. The great biodiversity of rainforests attracts scientists who study flora and fauna.

Other groups have different reasons for coming to the rainforest. Some people come to clear land for farming or ranching. The result is **deforestation**, or the removal of trees from large areas. Other people are more interested in **sustainable development**. This means finding ways to use the resources of the rainforest without destroying it.

The Lungs of the Earth Many people around the world worry about the fate of the Amazon rainforest. A major reason for their concern is that tropical rainforests affect life far beyond their borders. The trees and plants that grow in these dense forests have been called the “lungs of the Earth.”

This nickname comes from the key role that rainforests play in Earth's **carbon-oxygen cycle**. This series of events turns a gas called carbon dioxide, or CO₂, into oxygen. Then it turns the oxygen back into CO₂. In this way, carbon and oxygen are “cycled” among the living things that need them to survive.

Here is how the cycle works. When people and other animals breathe, their bodies take in oxygen and breathe out CO₂. Cars and factories also produce CO₂ as a waste product when burning fuel. Trees and other plants absorb CO₂ from the air. The plants use the carbon for their growth. They release the oxygen back into the air as a waste product. When people and other animals breathe in this oxygen, the cycle begins again.

Because they are rich in plant life, rainforests are a major part of the carbon-oxygen cycle. Scientists believe that the Amazon rainforest alone creates a quarter of Earth's oxygen. The oxygen you are breathing right now may have come from a rainforest tree.



3. What Native Amazonians Want



Once there were as many as 10 million native people living in the Amazon rainforest. Today the number of native Amazonians is much smaller. Those who remain want one thing above all: to continue their traditional way of life.

A Sustainable Way of Life Native people have lived in the rainforest for about 12,000 years. Many live as they always have. They hunt and fish, and they grow crops on small plots of land they have cleared in the forest. When a field is no longer fertile, they clear a new one somewhere else. Over time, new forest covers the old field. This is a sustainable way of life. It uses the resources of the Amazon rainforest without causing long-term damage.

In the 1960s, the government of Brazil decided to open the Amazon basin to development. It began by building a highway into the rainforest. Farmers, ranchers, and loggers followed the road into the Amazon region.

The arrival of so many newcomers has hurt native Amazonians. Many native people have been driven from their homelands to make room for farms and ranches. Some have died from diseases brought by newcomers. Others have been killed or injured in land use conflicts.

Save the Forest to Save Us Today native Amazonians are fighting to save parts of the rainforest from development. They say they have a right to preserve themselves and their way of life. As native leader Davi Kopenawa has said, "I want to live where I really belong, on my own land."

In their struggle to survive, native Amazonians have had to learn new skills. One is how to speak Portuguese, the official language of Brazil. Another is how to work with Brazil's government and legal system. Native groups have called on the Brazilian government to make them the legal owners of their homelands. Only then will they be able to keep others from destroying their rainforest home.

12.4 What Rubber Tappers Want



Rubber tappers have lived in the Amazon basin for many generations. Rubber tappers "tap," or collect, the sap from rubber trees that grow in the rainforest. The sap is then dried to make rubber products such as erasers or tires for cars and bikes.

Rubber Tapping Does Not Hurt the Forest Rubber tappers first came to the Amazon in the 1870s. They were hired to work on rubber tree plantations in the rainforest. When the price of rubber dropped, most of the plantations were abandoned. But some rubber tappers stayed and continued to make their living in the rainforest.

Rubber tappers remove sap from a rubber tree by making diagonal cuts in the bark. They collect the sap in cups. Removing the sap in this way does not harm the tree. This makes rubber tapping a sustainable activity. It is one way to use the resources of the rainforest without harming the environment.

In the 1960s, the government of Brazil decided that there were better ways to use the rainforest. It encouraged people to clear the forest for farms and ranches. In the deforestation that followed, many rubber trees disappeared. This led to land use conflict between rubber tappers and newcomers.

Let Us Continue Our Sustainable Way of Life Rubber tappers want to go on making a living from the rainforest. To do this, they need to stop the widespread clearing of trees. They have asked the

government to create protected [reserves](#) in the rainforest. These areas would be set aside for sustainable activities like rubber tapping.

Rubber tappers believe that their right to the rainforest comes from having worked there for so long. They also argue that their way of life does not harm the rainforest. For this reason, they believe, the government should protect their activities

12.5 What Loggers Want

Logging companies began moving into the Amazon basin in the 1960s. Loggers harvest trees from forests for use in wood products. These products range from paper to fine furniture.

The Rainforest Is a Source of Valuable Hardwoods A great variety of trees grows in the Amazon rainforest. The most valuable are hardwood trees such as mahogany and rosewood. Furniture makers all over the world use the beautiful wood from these trees.

Unfortunately, these valuable trees are scattered throughout the rainforest. This makes it hard to find and cut just the hardwoods. Instead, loggers [clear-cut](#) whole patches of rainforest. This means that they cut down all of the trees in an area. Once all the trees are removed, the loggers move on to another patch.

Logging companies argue that clear-cutting is the only way they can make money. But clear-cutting is also a major cause of deforestation. The larger the area that is stripped of its trees, the longer it takes for the rainforest to grow back.

Logging also leads to other types of development. Logging companies build roads deep into the rainforest so that they can move logs by truck. Settlers looking for land follow these logging roads into the forest. Once there, they claim land for farming and ranching.

We Need Trees to Help Brazil's Economy Many groups oppose clear-cutting of the rainforest. Loggers reply that they are helping Brazil's economy grow. Logging, they say, creates jobs for people in the [forestry](#) industry. It also provides wood for Brazil's furniture factories and paper mills.

Lumber companies also argue that they have made forestry a valuable [economic activity](#) for Brazil. In 2005, Brazil exported more than \$5 billion worth of wood. The money earned from these sales is helping Brazil to pay off its debts. It is also making life better for many people.

12.6 What Settlers Want



Brazil has the eleventh largest economy in the world. Yet about one quarter of Brazilians are poor. In [rural](#) areas, even more of the population is poor.

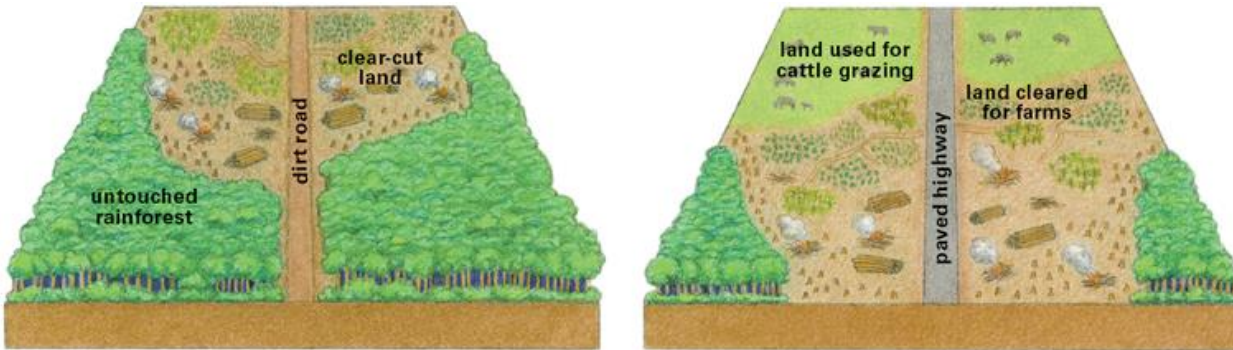
In the 1960s, the Brazilian government began encouraging poor people to move to the Amazon rainforest. The settlers came in large numbers, looking for land to farm.

A Lot of Land, but Not for the Poor Brazil is a vast country but has limited areas of farmland. And this land is not shared equally. A few wealthy families have long owned most of the best farmland. Millions of poor Brazilians own no land at all. For many families, the idea of owning a farm in the Amazon basin once seemed like a distant dream.

The Brazilian government did what it could to make this dream come true. Poor families were brought to the rainforest by the government. They were given free land and money to plant their first crops.

We Need Land to Feed Our Families Over time, the settlers' dream has become a nightmare for many farm families. As native Amazonians learned long ago, farming in a rainforest is difficult. The thin soil is surprisingly poor in [nutrients](#), the substances that make a field fertile. Constant rainfall soon washes away whatever nutrients the soil once contained. As the soil loses its fertility, the amount of food it can produce shrinks. Native Amazonians solved this problem by clearing new fields every few years. Over time, their abandoned fields regained some fertility.

Brazilian settlers cannot move so easily. As more settlers have cleared land for farming, opposition to them has grown. Native Amazonians, rubber tappers, and ranchers all want settlers to leave the rainforest. Settlers argue that there is no land for them in other parts of Brazil. They say they must look to the rainforest for land to feed their families.



12.7 What Cattle Ranchers Want

A rainforest may not seem like cattle country. But since the 1960s, parts of the Amazon basin have become just that. Although Amazon cattle ranchers are a small group, they own large areas of rainforest land.

Cattle Need Grasslands to Graze Rainforest cattle graze mainly on grass. They eat the grass in an area all the way down to the dirt. Then they are moved to a new area with fresh grass to eat. Moving cattle from place to place gives grazed areas a chance to grow new grass. It also uses up a lot of land.

Today cattle can be found grazing on vast areas of grassland in the Amazon basin. Loggers cleared some of this land. Farmers and ranchers cleared the rest. Once large areas of rainforest are cleared, the trees seldom grow back. Instead, the cleared areas become grasslands. This permanent deforestation upsets many people. But it is a great benefit to ranchers.

We Need Land to Feed the World Many people argue that cattle don't belong in a rainforest. Cattle ranchers strongly disagree. They say they are making good use of rainforest land by raising food for the world and earning money for Brazil.

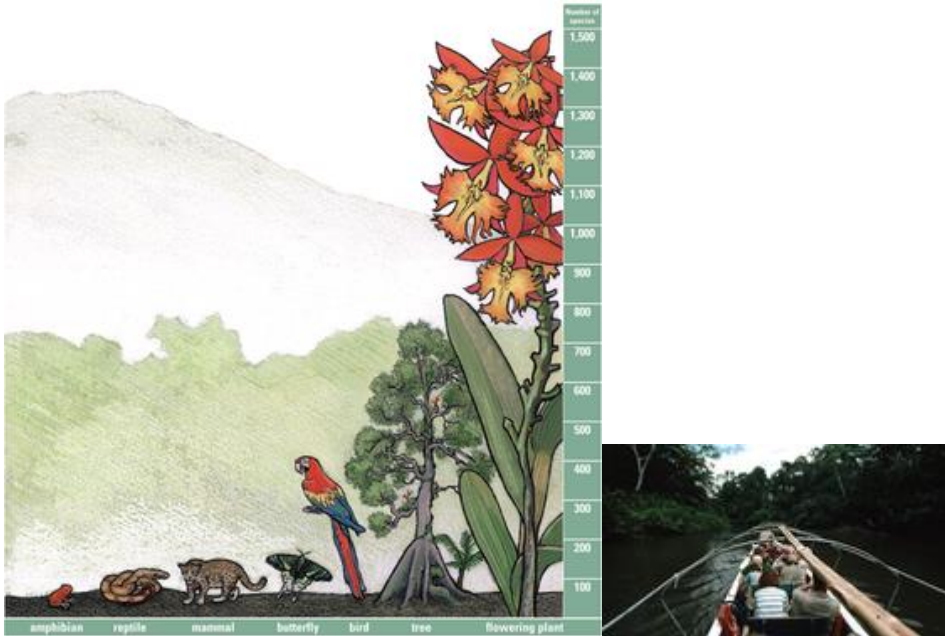
Many countries import beef from Brazil. In fact, the United States is one of the biggest buyers of Brazilian beef. Some environmental groups are not happy with this trade. They estimate that 55 square feet of rainforest have to be cleared for every hamburger sold in the United States.

Like logging, cattle ranching has become an important economic activity in Brazil. In 2008, the value of beef exported to other countries was more than \$3 billion. Brazil can use the money earned from beef sales to help pay its debts and take care of its citizens.



12.8 What Environmental Groups Want

Not all Brazilians want to see the Amazon basin developed. Environmental groups have worked for years to slow the clearing of the rainforest. Their ideas have led to conflict with many other groups.



Protecting the Biodiversity of the Rainforest Scientists and [environmentalists](#) began coming to the rainforest in the 1970s. Some came to study rainforest plants. They hoped to find plants that could cure diseases. Others came to study rainforest animals. Still others came to work with native peoples. All these groups are united in wanting to protect the rainforest and its biodiversity. Scientists estimate that a 2.5-acre patch of rainforest contains 750 kinds of trees. The same patch supports 1,500 kinds of flowering plants. It is home to 125 species of mammals and 400 kinds of birds. And these numbers include only the plants and animals that scientists already know about. Countless unknown species also live in the rainforest.

We Want Slower, Smarter Rainforest Development Environmental groups argue that all rainforest species have a right to exist. This means saving their rainforest home. Environmentalists therefore want to slow down development of the rainforest. This would give scientists time to study the effects of new activities. With that information, better decisions can be made for the future.

In 2000, environmental groups won a major victory against ranchers. They were able to block a law that would have let ranchers clear rainforest land without restrictions. Another victory came in 2004. In that year, Brazil's government created two large rainforest reserves. Only sustainable activities like rubber tapping are allowed in these places. In 2008, Brazil's leaders set up a \$21 billion fund. It will pay for conservation and sustainable development in the Amazon. Norway has already promised to give a billion dollars to this fund.

12.9 Ideas for Reducing Land Use Conflict

Each of the groups you have read about has its own ideas for how best to use or preserve the Amazon rainforest. Often this has led to land use conflict. A few groups, however, are looking at ways to balance preservation and development. In this way, they hope to meet the needs of people while reducing harm to the rainforest. Here are some of their ideas.

Promote Ecotourism Most countries encourage [tourism](#). This is the business of organizing travel for pleasure. Attracting tourists helps a country's economy. Tourists spend money on hotels, meals, services, and souvenirs.

Some tour companies are promoting a new type of tourism called [ecotourism](#). This kind of travel attracts people who want to visit unique ecosystems, such as a rainforest. Boat tours of the Amazon rainforest attract ecotourists from all over the world.

Ecotourism offers many benefits. It creates jobs for people in the tourist industry. It helps the economy by bringing in money. Most important, it gives people a reason to preserve the places that ecotourists come to see. The great danger of ecotourism is overuse. If too many tourists visit a fragile area, they may help to destroy what they have come to see.

Encourage Sustainable Development Another way to balance development and preservation is to encourage sustainable development. In Brazil, this means finding ways to use the rainforest without destroying it. One way is by growing crops that don't require large areas to be cleared.

An example of such a crop is shade-grown coffee. This method of growing coffee makes good use of rainforest trees. The coffee bushes are planted under a canopy of trees. The trees keep the bushes from getting too much sun. Leaves from the coffee bushes enrich the soil. Coffee bushes also provide [habitat](#) for birds. The birds, in turn, eat bugs that attack coffee plants. This type of farming uses little or no chemicals. This is good for both coffee planters and coffee drinkers.

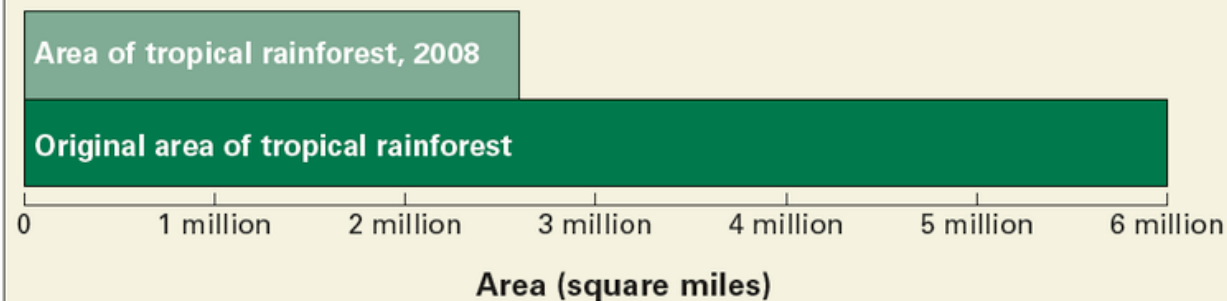
Another less harmful way of using the rainforest is strip logging. Instead of clear-cutting large areas, strip loggers clear long, narrow strips of forest. The forest grows back in these strips far more quickly than in large clear-cut areas.

Buy Products that Protect the Rainforest Consumers can help protect the rainforest by buying products that support sustainable development. Examples include ice creams and cereals made with Brazil nuts. The companies that make these products buy the nuts from native Amazonians. This helps native peoples make a living without damage to the rainforest.

Another example is wood products. Not all wood is harvested in the same way. Some wood is logged in ways that destroy a forest. And some is harvested with care and respect for the forest.

Until recently, there was no way for people to know if they were buying "good wood." Then, in the 1990s, logging companies and environmental groups created certification programs to help wood buyers. Under these programs, products from well-managed forests are certified, or labeled. The label tells a buyer that the product comes from "good wood." Consumers today can buy many certified "good wood" products from forests in Brazil. They include lumber, charcoal, pencils, furniture, and musical instruments.

Loss of Tropical Rainforest Worldwide



Summary - Beginning to Think Globally

In this chapter, you read about land use conflict in the Amazon rainforest. You learned that the rainforest is an important part of the carbon-oxygen cycle. It is also rich in biodiversity. But since the 1960s, loggers, settlers, and ranchers have cleared large parts of the rainforest. Native Amazonians, rubber tappers, and environmental groups oppose this deforestation. Still, the rainforest is shrinking year by year.

Not all countries are losing forests as rapidly as Brazil. Some are even gaining forests. This is called [reforestation](#). In some places, this process is happening naturally. In the eastern United States, forests have taken over abandoned farm fields. In other places, people are planting trees to create new forests. In the next section, you will look at deforestation and reforestation around the world.

▶ Geoterms

biodiversity the variety of plants and animals living in one area. The term can also mean the great variety of all living things on Earth.

carbon-oxygen cycle the process by which carbon and oxygen cycle among plants, people and animals, and the environment

deforestation removing or clearing away the trees from a forest. Deforestation is often done to clear land for farming or ranching.

sustainable development using resources in ways that meet the needs of people today without hurting the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This means finding ways to use resources without using them up.

tropical rainforest a broadleaf evergreen forest found in wet and hot regions near the equator