Fires in the Amazon

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MORE FREE
The Amazon is burning! Thousands of fires are consuming the planet’s largest and most diverse rainforest.

The early-August news headlines captured the attention of the world. The fires were also a hot topic at a Group of Seven (G7) summit held in Biarritz, France in late August. French President Emmanuel Macron called the Amazon situation a crisis, tweeting “Our house is burning.” G7 nations agreed to contribute $20 million (US) toward protecting the rainforest.

Most of the international attention was focussed on Brazil, the South American country that contains about 60 percent of the Amazon. Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro was criticized for not doing more to stop the environmental destruction. Mr. Bolsonaro, in turn, accused other nations of interfering in Brazil’s internal affairs. He initially refused their money.

Meanwhile, the Amazon continued to burn.

**THE AMAZON’S IMPORTANCE**

The Amazon rainforest covers a vast area, about half the size of Canada. It extends from Brazil into Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. The rainforest is criss-crossed by thousands of rivers, including the Amazon River itself.

The Amazon is so big, it affects our climate by acting as a cooling system for the planet. More importantly, it absorbs and stores vast amounts of planet-warming carbon dioxide – some 90 billion tons – that would otherwise contribute to global warming.

The rainforest is also renowned for its biological diversity. It is home to three million species; one in ten of all known plants and animals on Earth can be found there. As well, some 305 Indigenous groups live in the Amazon and depend on it for food and shelter.

**PLAYING WITH FIRE**

For decades, there has been a struggle between those who want to clear and develop the rainforest for cattle ranching, soy farming, mining, and logging, and those who want to protect it.

A period of unchecked forest clearing from 1996 to 2005 prompted global outrage. As a result, the Brazilian government of the day embarked on an enormous and successful effort to reduce deforestation rates. The rates dropped 70 percent, even as the production of soy and cattle continued to grow. It looked as though the conservationists were winning.

But in the past five years, that trend has reversed. And since the election of President Bolsonaro last October, the rate of deforestation has sharply accelerated.

On paper, under Brazilian law, half the Amazon is protected against deforestation. But the Brazilian president wants to open up the rainforest to development. His government has weakened environmental protections and encouraged cattle farmers to clear vast areas.

How do farmers remove the trees from their land? By setting fires, that often grow out of control and burn more...
than the intended area – as was the case in August.

“Virtually all fires in the Amazon are started by people,” says Dan Nepstad, one of the world’s leading Amazon forest experts. “They often escape their intended boundaries, into neighbouring forests.”

**Why is this a global problem?**

More than 82,000 forest fires were recorded in Brazil in the first eight months of the year – the highest number since 2010. That compares with 49,000 in the same period in 2018.

Countries around the world were gravely concerned, because destruction of the rainforest affects the whole planet. In addition to a loss of biological diversity, it means that the basin is less able to soak up carbon emissions. More alarming still, some scientists believe that the Amazon forest is nearing a tipping point. It could soon cease to be a **sustainable ecosystem**.

Normally, the forest acts like a giant firebreak across the landscape. The damp layer of leaves, twigs, and branches in the forest’s deep shade does not readily burn. But this litter layer dries out during drought years and especially when forest cover is reduced. When that happens, successive fires become more intense, and kill more trees. As the forest repeatedly burns, grasses and shrubs start invading what was once **pristine** forest. The vegetation changes to scrub grasslands and savanna, and the land becomes a producer of carbon rather than a carbon sink.

**Working towards a common goal**

Yet farming, ranching, and other industries in the Amazon generate funds Brazil needs to pay for schools and other social services. Agribusiness accounts for 25 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product, and the government relies on this income to take care of its citizens.

So what’s the solution? Conservation organizations say developing versus protecting the Amazon doesn’t have to be an either-or scenario. It’s possible to meet regional and global demand for natural resources from the Amazon while conserving it. In recent years, they’ve been working with locals to implement practical measures and **innovative** solutions that simultaneously maintain healthy tropical forest ecosystems and meet the socio-economic needs of regional communities.

Even some businesses are getting on board. Brazil’s leading meat export industry group and agricultural businesses, for example, have joined an environmental campaign calling for an end to deforestation in public lands in the Amazon and demanding government action.

‘**We will do better**’

Meanwhile, in September, in response to global concern about the fires, seven South American nations, including Brazil, signed a pact at a summit in Colombia to protect the Amazon basin. It includes measures to boost reforestation, educate the public, set up a disaster response network, and implement better satellite monitoring.

“This meeting will live on as a coordination mechanism for the presidents that share this treasure – the Amazon,” said Colombian President Iván Duque.

“Goodwill alone is not enough anymore,” added Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra. ★

**Definitions**

**Ecosystem:** all the plants and animals in a particular area, considered as a system with parts that depend on one another

**Implement:** to make something such as an idea, plan, system, or law start to work and be used

**Innovative:** new, original, and advanced

**Pristine:** in a pure state, without human alteration; untouched

**Sustainable:** capable of continuing for a long time at the same level

**Fake News**

Many inaccurate reports relating to the Amazon fires circulated in August. Some media tweets, for example, featured dramatic photos of raging fires. On closer scrutiny, some of these photos were many years old, or not from the Amazon at all. Yet they were shared by the likes of actor Leonardo DiCaprio, soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo, and even French President Emmanuel Macron.

Another frequently repeated misunderstanding was that the Amazon is “the lungs” of our planet, producing oxygen we need to survive. That’s not true, say scientists. Amazon plants do produce oxygen (through photosynthesis), but the plants and animals then use up most of it (through respiration). The result is a bit of a wash – as much oxygen is consumed as is created. In fact, our planet has a surplus of breathable oxygen – enough to last for millions of years.

Environmentalists caution that inaccurate reporting harms the credibility of journalists, scientists, and the media, and can hinder progress towards a resolution.
Answer the following in complete sentences:

1. Describe the size and location of the Amazon Rainforest.

2. List at least four other important facts about this region.

3. What general trends have occurred in the Amazon rainforest over the past 15 years?

4. What policies has the Brazilian government adopted that affect the Amazon rainforest?

5. How do many Brazilian farmers remove trees from their land?

6. How many fires have occurred in Brazil from January to August?

7. Explain why countries around the world were concerned about these fires.

8. Describe the agreement recently signed by various South American countries to help protect the rainforest.
BETWEEN THE LINES

An inference is a conclusion drawn from evidence. A plausible inference is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.

Make a prediction: What do you suppose the health of the Amazon rainforest ecosystem will be like ten years from now? Give reasons to support your response.

JUST TALK ABOUT IT

1. What is your understanding of the reasons for the August Amazon fires? Explain.

2. What reasons can you suggest to explain why Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro initially refused $20 million (US) from the G7 for protecting the Amazon? Do you agree or disagree with his position? Why or why not?

3. What if... there were no Amazon rainforest?

4. What do you suppose French President Emmanuel Macron meant when he tweeted “Our house is burning” in reference to the Amazon fires? Explain.

5. In the context of the article, what do you suppose Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra meant when he said, “Goodwill alone is not enough anymore.”? Explain.

ONLINE

Note: The links below are listed at www.lesplan.com/en/links for easy access.

1. Find out more about why the Amazon rainforest is important at http://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/where_we_work/amazon/about_the_amazon/why_amazon_important/.

2. Watch a short video by the Telegraph called 'Debunking the fake Amazon rainforest fire pictures shared by celebrities' at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCpQKkJq70M [1:46]

3. Watch National Geographic’s Wild Amazon documentary at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5UPc8dya-M [44:53]

INFOGRAPHIC

Respond to the infographic on page 8. What information conveyed in the infographic is new to you? What is interesting to you? What seems to be especially significant? Why? Overall, how does the information in this infographic enhance your understanding of the Amazon rainforest and the fires burning there? Explain. ★
Amazon wildfires by the numbers

More than 82,200 fires have been detected in Brazil’s Amazon rainforest, with over 1,660 new fires ignited in just two days.

### Wildfires in South America, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Fires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French Guyana</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suriname</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiana</td>
<td>896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>2,935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>6,397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>10,627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>14,067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>14,331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>19,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>26,547</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Wildfires in Brazil, 1998-2018

*(Detected by satellite, Jan 1 to Aug 26)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Fires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>45,656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>59,672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>78,263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>58,936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>64,632</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>40,166</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>77,841</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>43,582</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>124,936</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>49,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>32,437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>47,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>39,197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research, National Geographic, PBS © GRAPHIC NEWS
MAP ASSIGNMENT

Complete this map assignment to better understand the article *The Amazon in the Spotlight.*

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Obtain the required resources and read all the instructions before starting.

2. Colour your map after all labelling is completed.

3. Print in pencil only first, then go over the printing in black ink.

4. Work carefully and neatly.

**Part A** Locate and label the following countries in CAPITAL letters and shade each as indicated:

- Venezuela (orange)
- Brazil (green)
- Peru (red)
- Paraguay (pink)
- Argentina (purple)
- Colombia (brown)
- Ecuador (purple)
- Bolivia (yellow)
- Chile (orange)
- Uruguay (yellow)

**Part B** Locate and label the capital of each country above and underline each city name.

**Part C** Locate and label the following countries in CAPITAL letters and shade each as indicated:

- Nicaragua (red)
- Panama (yellow)
- Guyana (pink)
- French Guiana (red)
- Costa Rica (green)
- Trinidad and Tobago (yellow)
- Suriname (yellow)

**Part D** Locate and label the following cities:

- Sao Paulo
- Salvador
- Belo Horizonte
- Rio de Janeiro
- Fortaleza
- Manaus

**Part E** Draw and label the following rivers and shade them light blue:

- Amazon
- Tapajos
- Tocantins
- Madeira
- Negro
- Sao Francisco
- Paraná

**Part F** Locate and label the following and shade all ocean water dark blue:

- Caribbean Sea
- Atlantic Ocean
- Pacific Ocean

**Part G** Draw and label the Equator (0˚) and the Tropic of Capricorn (23˚ S).

**Part H** Use the key to show the Amazon Rainforest on your map.

**Part I** Complete your map with a frame, title and compass.
A. Write the letter that corresponds to the best answer on the line beside each question:

1. How much of the Amazon rainforest is located in Brazil?
   a) 15 percent   b) 30 percent
   c) 45 percent   d) 60 percent
   e) 75 percent

2. The Amazon Rainforest acts as a _____ system for the planet.
   a) heating   b) carbon
   c) biodiversity   d) cooling
   e) oxygen

3. How many fires have burned in Brazil’s rainforest from January to August?
   a) 1,000   b) 17,000
   c) 32,000   d) 50,000
   e) 82,000

B. Mark the statements T (True) or F (False). If a statement is True, write one important fact to support it on the line below. If a statement is False, write the words that make it true on the line below.

4. True or False? Three million species live in the Amazon rainforest.

5. True or False? Brazil’s government has strengthened environmental protection for the rainforest.

6. True or False? The Earth is rapidly running out of oxygen.

C. Fill in the blanks to complete each sentence.

7. Brazilian farmers often use fire to remove _________________ from their land.

8. The Amazon rainforest absorbs and stores vast amounts of _________________ dioxide.

9. The _________________ leaders offered Brazil $20 million (US) to help protect the rainforest.

D. Respond to the following question in paragraph form. (Use a separate sheet of paper if necessary.)

Brazil should be allowed to manage its portion of the Amazon as it wishes. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons to explain your answer.
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