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The Amazon Rainforest

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The Amazon Rainforest

The Amazon is both the world's biggest rainforest and its mightiest river. This lesson covers its size, its flow, its life, how it makes rain, why it is cleared and the fires of 2026.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **~40% of S. America** The area of the river basin.

02 **9 territories** Eight countries plus French Guiana.

03 **60x the Nile** Its flow, per Guinness.

04 **3,335 km²** Cleared in the 12 months to July 2026.

How big is the Amazon, and where does it lie?

1 Size and Place

1.1 Where does the Amazon lie?

The Amazon River Basin covers some **40 percent of South America**. It includes parts of eight South American countries.

These are Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana and Suriname. French Guiana, a department of France, is the ninth territory.



The rainforest (dark green) and its wider drainage basin (light green), spanning nine countries and territories. Map: CactiStaccingCrane, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

1.2 Is it the biggest rainforest?

Yes. The Amazon is the world's biggest rainforest. It is larger than the next two largest rainforests combined.

Those two are the Congo Basin and Indonesia. As of 2020 the Amazon held 526 million hectares of primary forest.

The Amazon at a glance

Feature	Value
Share of South America	About 40 percent (basin)
Countries and territories	Eight countries plus French Guiana
Primary forest (2020)	526 million hectares
Rank among rainforests	Largest in the world

Figures from Mongabay.

10. **Think it through:** Is the rainforest the same thing as the river basin? See answer ↓

Quick check 1. True or false: The Amazon is larger than the next two largest rainforests put together. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: rainforests.mongabay.com; education.nationalgeographic.org

How much water does the Amazon carry?

2 The River Itself

2.1 How much water does the Amazon carry?

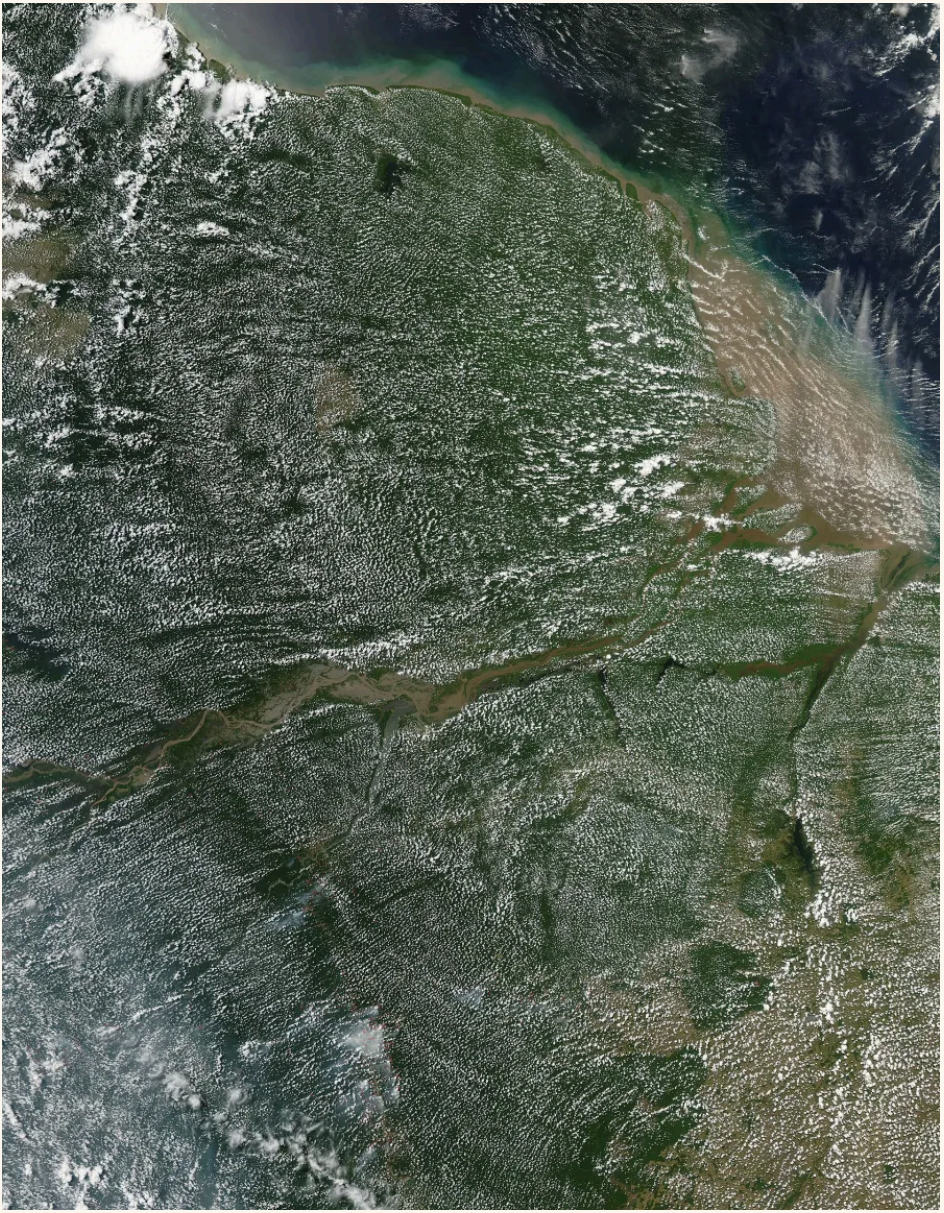
Estimates have risen as more measurements were made. The river now averages about **215,000 to 230,000 cubic metres per second**.

Guinness World Records gives a lower average of 200,000 cubic metres per second. In full flood the flow passes 340,000.

2.2 How does it compare with other rivers?

The Amazon’s flow is 5 times that of the Congo and 12 times that of the Mississippi.

Guinness says its flow is 60 times greater than that of the Nile.



The Amazon rainforest and river seen from space, with afternoon clouds forming over the forest. NASA image by Jeff Schmaltz, MODIS Rapid Response, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

2.3 How much of the world's river water is this?

The river drains about **38 percent** of continental South America. It supplies 15 to 16 percent of the river water that reaches the world’s oceans.

In flood season its muddy water can be seen about 160 km out in the Atlantic.

Amazon flow against other rivers

Comparison	Amazon flow is
Congo	5 times greater
Mississippi	12 times greater
Nile	60 times greater (Guinness)

Figures from the Amazon Waters Initiative and Guinness World Records.

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: The Amazon's flow is about 60 times that of the Nile. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: aguasamazonicas.org; guinnessworldrecords.com

What do drainage basin, tributary and transpiration mean?

3 Key Terms

3.1 What is a drainage basin?

A **drainage basin** is all the land whose water flows into one river system. Rain that falls anywhere inside it ends up in the same river.

Think of a giant funnel, with the river as the spout. The Amazon's funnel covers about 40 percent of South America.

It matters because what happens on any part of the basin, like clearing forest, affects the whole river.

3.2 What is a tributary?

A **tributary** is a smaller river that flows into a larger one. The Amazon has over 1,100 of them.

Seventeen are longer than 1,000 miles. Two of them, the Negro and the Madeira, carry more water than the Congo river.

It matters because the Amazon's huge flow is the sum of all these feeders. Exam questions often ask which rivers are its tributaries.

3.3 What is transpiration?

Transpiration is the release of water vapour from plant leaves into the air. Trees pull water up from the soil and breathe it out.

Picture millions of trees acting like tiny pumps. In the Amazon they lift vast amounts of vapour into the sky each day.

It matters because that vapour forms clouds and rain, even far from the forest.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: A tributary is a river that flows into a larger river. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How much life does the Amazon hold?

4 Life in the Forest

4.1 How much life does the Amazon hold?

The Amazon has more species of plants and animals than any other land ecosystem. Perhaps **30 percent of the world's species** live there.

These numbers show how rich it is.

- **Plants:** about 40,000 species.
- **Trees:** about 16,000 species.
- **Fish:** about 3,000 species.
- **Birds:** about 1,300 species.
- **Mammals:** more than 430 species.

4.2 Why does this matter for exams?

Biodiversity is a standard theme. The Amazon is the classic example of a **tropical rainforest** with very high species richness.

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: The Amazon has fewer species than a typical desert. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How does the forest make rain?

5 Flying Rivers

5.1 How does the forest make rain?

Trees pump vast quantities of water vapour into the air every day by transpiration.

Much of this water falls locally as rain. Some is carried by winds across the continent.

5.2 What are flying rivers?

This movement of moisture has been likened to **flying rivers**. The vapour travels in the air, like a river in the sky.

By one estimate, 70 percent of Brazil's gross national product comes from areas that receive rainfall made by the Amazon.

> 11. **Think it through:** What happens to farms far away if the forest shrinks? See answer ↓

Quick check 5. True or false: The Amazon rainforest has no effect on rainfall outside the forest. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why are Amazon forests cleared?

6 Why Forests Fall

6.1 What drives clearing?

Conversion for cattle grazing is the biggest single direct driver of deforestation.

In Brazil, more than 60 percent of cleared land ends up as pasture.

6.2 Do crops play a part?

Yes. Soy farms have been an important driver of deforestation since the early 1990s.

- **Cattle ranching:** the biggest single direct driver.
- **Soy farming:** important since the early 1990s.
- **Pasture:** over 60 percent of cleared land in Brazil.

Quick check 6. True or false: Soy farms have been a driver of Amazon deforestation since the early 1990s. *(True or False?)*

See answer ↓

How much forest is being cleared now?

7 Deforestation Now

7.1 What did the official numbers show in 2025?

Brazil's PRODES system recorded **5,796 square kilometres** of clearing. This was an 11 percent fall on the year before.

IPAM calls it the third lowest rate since the series began in 1988.

7.2 What about the latest year?

A Mongabay report dated 16 October 2026 says deforestation fell 42 percent to a record low. INPE data show 3,335 square kilometres cleared in the 12 months to 31 July 2026.

The fall is large. But clearing is only one threat.

Clearing in the Brazilian Amazon

Period to July	Area cleared
2025	5,796 km² (PRODES, third lowest since 1988)
2026	3,335 km² (INPE, record low)

Figures from IPAM and Mongabay.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: Deforestation in 2026 was the highest in the series. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: ipam.org.br

Why are fires burning in 2026?

8 Fire and El Niño

8.1 What is happening in 2026?

A drought linked to El Niño has left the Amazon **primed to burn**, NASA scientists say.

Satellites saw sharp rises in fire from September 2026 in the central and eastern Amazon.

8.2 How dry has it been?

Manaus rainfall was 95 percent below normal in August and 60 percent below in September.

On 12 October heavy smoke covered Manaus, a city of more than 2 million people.

8.3 Who starts these fires?

Lightning starts less than 1 percent of fires in the Brazilian Amazon. So people start nearly all of them.

Many began as clearing fires that escaped and now burn freely through the dry forest floor.

8.4 What is the cascade?

El Niño brings a **cascade** of fire across the tropics. It starts in Indonesia and then reaches the central and eastern Amazon.

Scientists expect a later wave in Roraima, northern Pará and Amapá in November and December.

12. **Think it through:** Can low deforestation and high fire both be true? See answer ↓

Quick check 8. True or false: Lightning starts most fires in the Brazilian Amazon. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: science.nasa.gov

What do exams ask about the Amazon?

9 Exam Traps

9.1 What do exams ask about the Amazon?

Questions on tropical rainforests often describe the forest floor and its plants.

13. **Exam angle:** UPSC CSP 2021, Q60 gave a description and asked which biome it was. The description said leaf litter decomposes faster than in any other biome, and the soil surface is often almost bare. See answer ↓

- (a) coniferous forest
- (b) dry deciduous forest
- (c) mangrove forest
- (d) tropical rain forest

9.2 Which mix-ups cost marks?

Questions usually test one of these confusions.

- Mixing up the **rainforest** and the **drainage basin**. The basin is larger.
- Forgetting **French Guiana** when counting the nine territories.
- Calling **lightning** the main cause of fires. People start nearly all of them.
- Thinking the Amazon is smaller than the Nile in flow. Its flow is about **60 times greater**.

Quick check 9. True or false: The Amazon basin covers about 40 percent of South America. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **Basin:** about 40 percent of South America, eight countries plus French Guiana.
- **Rainforest:** the world's biggest, larger than the next two combined.
- **River:** 5 times the Congo, 12 times the Mississippi, about 60 times the Nile.
- **Life:** perhaps 30 percent of the world's species.
- **2026:** record-low clearing, but an El Niño fire season.

Explain it back: Say in your own words how the forest helps make rain.

Practice MCQs

1. Roughly what share of South America does the Amazon River Basin cover?

A. About 40 percent

B. About 70 percent

C. About 10 percent

D. About 25 percent

See answer ↓

2. Which statement about the Amazon's flow is correct?

A. It is about equal to the Nile's

B. It is about 60 times the Nile's

C. It is smaller than the Congo's

D. It is 5 times smaller than the Mississippi's

See answer ↓

3. About how much water does the Amazon discharge each second on average?

A. About 2 million cubic metres

B. About 2,000 cubic metres

C. More than 200,000 cubic metres

D. About 20,000 cubic metres

See answer ↓

4. Brazil's PRODES recorded 5,796 square kilometres of Amazon clearing in 2025. How did this compare with earlier years?

A. The highest since 1988

B. The third lowest since 1988

C. Unchanged from 2024

D. A rise of 11 percent

See answer ↓

5. According to NASA scientists, what starts almost all fires in the Brazilian Amazon?

A. Volcanic activity

B. People

C. Lightning

D. Meteor strikes

See answer ↓

6. How does the Amazon rainforest rank among the world's rainforests?

A. Second largest, after the Congo

B. About equal to the Congo

C. Third largest, after Indonesia

D. Largest, bigger than the next two combined

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.**
   The Amazon River Basin covers some 40 percent of South America. It spans eight countries plus French Guiana.
   ↑ Q1
2. **B.**
   Guinness World Records reports that the Amazon's flow is 60 times that of the Nile. The Amazon Waters Initiative says it is 5 times the Congo and 12 times the Mississippi.
   ↑ Q2
3. **C.**
   Estimates run from 200,000 to 230,000 cubic metres per second on average. In full flood the flow passes 340,000.
   ↑ Q3
4. **B.**
   The figure was an 11 percent fall on 2024. IPAM calls it the third lowest rate since the series began in 1988.
   ↑ Q4
5. **B.**
   Lightning ignites less than 1 percent of fires in the Brazilian Amazon. People start nearly all of them, often by clearing fires that escape.
   ↑ Q5
6. **D.**
   The Amazon is the world's biggest rainforest. It is larger than the next two, the Congo Basin and Indonesia, combined.
   ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The Congo Basin and Indonesia together are still smaller. ↑ 1
2. **True.** Guinness World Records reports this ratio. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The Amazon has over 1,100 of them. ↑ 3
4. **False.** It has more species than any other land ecosystem. ↑ 4
5. **False.** Its vapour is carried across the continent as rain. ↑ 5

6. **True.** Cattle grazing is the biggest single direct driver. ↑ 6
7. **False.** It fell to a record low of 3,335 square kilometres. ↑ 7
8. **False.** It starts less than 1 percent. People start nearly all of them. ↑ 8
9. **True.** It covers some 40 percent of the continent. ↑ 9
10. **Think it through.** The basin is the whole land area that drains into the river. The rainforest is the forest that covers much of it. The basin is the bigger of the two. ↑ 10
11. **Think it through.** The air carries less vapour. Rain can fall short in regions that depend on it, including the farmland to the south. ↑ 11
12. **Think it through.** Deforestation counts forest cleared. Fire in a drought can burn forest that was never cleared. They are different measures. ↑ 12
13. **Think it through.** It added that apart from trees, the plants reach the canopy by climbing the trees or growing as epiphytes on the upper branches. The answer is (d), tropical rain forest. View this question on the full UPSC CSP 2021 paper. ↑ 13

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