

Anthropology of the Amazon – on-line open course resources

Module I:

Amazonian environment as a place to live

The course aims to explore the links between the indigenous people and the environment they live in so we will start with the basic information about the Amazonian rainforest. Amazon covers a vast region – from the Andes in Ecuador to the river mouth of the Amazon in Brazil. Most of the area is covered with the rainforest.

When we think about the Amazon we usually picture the vast forest with muddy rivers that cut through it – and in many places this image is more or less true. As we will see in the later part of the course, there is less and less pristine forest due to different human activities.

Climate along the equator is classified as tropical which means there is no truly dry season – all months have some of the precipitation. It sums up to over 3000 millimeters of rain every year. When we add the humidity of almost 90 per cent and average temperature of 26 degrees Celsius it becomes clear that the tropical climate might require some getting used to for Europeans travelling to this part of the world. Along the equator the Sun comes up around six a.m. every morning and sets around 6 p.m. so the days are always around 12 hours long.

The Amazon River basin carries 15 per cent of freshwater delivered to the oceans – it is the biggest river drainage in the world. The Amazon River itself is about 6500 to 6800 kilometers long – the estimation depends on the choosing of the river that is supposed to be the Amazon original beginning. The Amazon runs through Peru and Brazil where its upper stretches are called Solimoes as seen on the map.

The river can change the water level very quickly – after several hours of rain the water can rise significantly causing local floods. In other periods of time the level of the water can be so low that navigating through it can prove to be difficult especially in the upper part of the river. Some rapid water level changes can cause damage – the house seen on the picture was built several meters away from the river bank but ever changing levels of water altered the riverside and during one high water period the house fell into the water.

There are three kinds of water in the Amazon region – clear, black and muddy ones. Most of the muddy rivers of the Amazon have tributaries in the Andes – they carry lots of nutrients from the volcanic material. Clear waters differ in their actual color but they are referred to as “clear” because they have minimal suspended sediment loads. As for the blackwater rivers, they got their name from not completely decomposed plant compounds that fill their beds. You can see in the picture the difference in the water body: the Negro River flows into the Amazon River and the two types of water are mixing together in the huge swirl.

Rivers are main communication and travel routes in the Amazon. People depend on the rivers for many aspects of everyday life – such as bathing, washing clothes, finding food and others.

Amazonian rainforest stretches from Ecuador to the Eastern border of Brazil. Tropical rainforest can be found along the equator in Africa, Indo-Malaysia and of course in the Amazonia. The latter holds the most extensive rainforest of the world. It is also the biodiversity hotspot of the world. Many species of animals and plants live there – it was estimated that there are for example more species of trees in pristine Amazonian rainforest than in the whole North America.

The rainforest acts as the parasol, a pump and a recycler: almost 60 per cent of the rainfall is recycled directly to the atmosphere by transpiration through the rainforest and evaporation at the upper level of the canopy. The rest of the rainfall makes it into the body of rivers and is transferred to the Atlantic Ocean.

In some areas the tropical forest still reaches to the horizon. Many plants and animals inhabit the rainforest – some of them friendly, some not so friendly to people. Some of them might look scary but are actually quite harmless like this whipped-tailed scorpion. From others – like the emerald tree boa – you might not expect the speed and efficiency they represent. Numerous insects inhabit the rainforest – between them many species of ants. Some of them can be very dangerous as the toxic substances they produce are very strong. There is supposed to be 100000 species of insects per every hectare of pristine rainforest. Some species of mammals, including monkeys, live in the tropical forest. Woolly monkeys are the biggest ones. One of the most dangerous predators of the forest waters is the black caiman. Some of them can be several meters long.

Plants also can be fascinating in the rainforest. The tree shown on the left developed a very interesting technique for getting rid of the bacteria and parasites that are common in the humid environment: every few months it sheds its bark and grows a new and healthy one. The palm on the right is called “a stilt palm” and has the ability to move to some other spot that has better light or more nutrients. The stilt roots enable the palm to slowly move towards another destination – they grow more and more to the desired side and eventually the tree can shift to the place that offers better resources.

One of the most impressive plants of the rainforest is Kapok tree – its huge buttress roots form enormous walls of wood that help the tree get more nutrients from the soil. They keep the tree from tipping over in strong winds as well. It is also the tallest tree in the forest – often its top can be seen above the forest canopy. For indigenous people this tree is often sacred as it is known to be the nesting place of the Harpy, the species of eagle living in the forest.

The forest offers many resources that can be used for every day usage and indigenous people have vast knowledge of the forest that enables them to take advantage of it. On this picture you can see the bottle gourd. Many species of the plant grow around the world and some of them can also be found in the Amazon. The plant’s fruit can be cut in half, cleaned out of the insides, cooked for several minutes and let dry on the sun. As the outcome we can have the bowl widely used by indigenous people for eating, drinking and storage. Another plant that is commonly used in the region is the achiote – plant

that yields the small, red seeds. After drying and crushing them into powder they can be used for body painting that is done for ceremonial purposes. During the other presentations in the course you will see people painted with red achiote powder.

Bamboo and different species of palms are used in various ways. Some of them can be used to build a house – many of them have bamboo construction covered with thatched roof.

The forest also provides many medicines and indigenous people know their usage. Various species of plants can cure simple indispositions but also serious illnesses. The sap of the tree shown here, called Sangre de Drago (dragon blood) is used for curing all sorts of skin problems. Forest provides many more resources that indigenous people recognize and use.

Next part of the course will have to do with the indigenous people – their cultural practices and experiences.