



Maps and Graphs



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1.3 Rain Forests of Central America

Main Idea Central American rain forests are an important economic resource for the region.

Central America's rain forests cover a large portion of the region. Countries in the region are working to save rain forests and grow economically at the same time.

The Importance of Rain Forests

Central American rain forests have tall trees with broad leaves, and grow in tropical areas with heavy rainfall. A rain forest is an individual **ecosystem**, a place where plants and animals rely on the environment to survive. Many rare species make their homes in rain forests. The quetzal (ket SAHL), for example, is the national symbol of Guatemala. It makes a nest in rain forest trees.



Rain Forest Destruction

In the 1500s, rain forests covered most of Central America. They thrived for hundreds of years until the 1900s. From 1990 to 2005, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador lost 14 to 30 percent of their rain forest land.

There are several reasons for forest loss, or **deforestation**. Many forests are cleared for commercial farmland and for grazing cattle to supply the beef industry. Trees provide valuable timber, or wood for building. Rain forests are usually located in rural areas, where people use the land to survive. Trees are cut down for firewood and for small farms. However, rain forest soil is not very **fertile**, or able to produce plentiful crops. Rural farmers need to clear more land after nutrients in the soil are used up. The forests are being cleared faster than they can regrow.

The Future

Many countries encourage rain forest tourism. **Tourism**—the travel industry—brings income to the region and provides jobs so rural people do not need to depend on rain forest land for farming. Certain farming methods can also prevent further damage to rain forests. Shade coffee, for example, grows under the protection of trees. This crop can grow on the same soil as other crops, such as beans. This practice preserves soil quality.

Before You Move On

Make Inferences How do Central America's rain forests contribute to the economy?