BRAZIL

Background information for teachers

The Amerindians were the original inhabitants of Brazil but their numbers were decimated just over 500 years ago, in 1500, when the country was first discovered by Europeans. A Portuguese sailor set off on a journey to India, was blown off course and ended up in the country that eventually became known as Brazil. Temporary trading posts were quickly established in order to collect brazilwood for its treasured red dye, and later the sugar cane industry became a very important product as Brazilian sugar was considered to be of very high quality. It didn't take long for explorers to discover the natural resources of this vast country, the largest in South America, and many became extremely rich by raiding the hinterland tribes to enslave native Brazilians. Before slavery was abolished in 1888 it is thought that five million slaves were brought from Africa to work for the new landowners, and African culture still dominates the North East of the country. In the 18th century, explorers found gold and diamond deposits, and forced the native people and the African slaves to work in the mines.

Recently, Brazil was also found to be rich in minerals such as asbestos, copper, tin, potassium and zinc while 18% of all the iron ore mined in the world still comes from this country. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there was a growing demand for rubber and the new landowners made fortunes by selling harvested rubber from the vast tropical rainforest which runs all along the Amazon River in northern and central Brazil. Coffee and soybeans are also in great demand.

Brazil's large territory comprises different ecosystems, such as the Amazon Rainforest (recognized as having the greatest biological diversity in the world), the Atlantic Forest, and the Cerrado in the Brazilian Highlands which still sustains many rare birds and mammals such as giant anteaters although much of the area is rapidly being converted into farmland to produce soya beans and other crops.

When **Pedro Álvares Cabral** discovered Brazil, the Atlantic Forest covered about 1,250,000km^2 of land but now only about 5% is left, and the Amazon basin itself is experiencing massive deforestation with the result that many species of wildlife are being lost to us forever. There are so many species of plants and insects in Brazil that scientists still can only guess at the numbers though some suggest that there may be almost 4,000,000 species. More than 10% of the entire world's species live in Brazil and new species are found on nearly a daily basis. Over 270 species of birds live in the Pantanal wetlands alone.

By Liz Morris. Based on *The Dreaming Tree* by Eithne Massey.
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