

SAVING THE ENDANGERED SPECIES

THE AMAZON RIVER DOLPHIN

Vocabulary

Amazons – In Greek mythology, a race of female warriors.

biodiversity – the biological diversity in a specific area as measured by the number of species of plants and animals.

black macumba – A form of African spirit worship that entails the use of magic. It was brought to Brazil in the 1550s by slaves and today indigenous peoples use it as a reason to catch pink river dolphins for their supposedly magical qualities.

Inia geoffrensis – Scientific name for the river dolphin that lives in the Amazon. It is also known as Boto, or in Bolivia, Inia. Other names are Bufeio, Tonina, Pink Dolphin, and Pink Porpoise.

mercury -- A silver poisonous heavy metallic element, sometimes called quicksilver. In the Amazon River, gold mining causes it to leach into the water, poisoning the dolphins.

Important People

Sir David Attenborough – British naturalist who is a widely read author and one of the world's leading television documentary makers on wildlife.

Roxanne Kremer – Executive director and founder of the International Society for the Preservation of the Tropical Rainforest. She has been a leading advocate for the preservation of the Amazon River dolphin.

Francisco de Orellana – Spanish explorer who sailed up the Amazon River in 1541. After hearing tales from local inhabitants of woman warriors in the jungles, he named the river after the Amazons of Greek legend (see Vocabulary).

Sandi Schreib – Dolphin trainer with the Pittsburgh Zoo & Aquarium (see Internet Resources).

Atossa Soltani – Executive director of Amazon Watch, an organization working to preserve the environment and peoples of the Amazon River.

Lyall Watson – Documentary maker, author, zoo administrator, and naturalist who has written over 20 books on nature.

Things To Think About

In the documentary, it is said that the weather conditions in the Amazon Rain Forest can affect the weather in such places as Iowa? How is this possible? Why does this fact make it so important to study the Amazon?

What methods can be used to challenge the belief in the magical powers of the dolphin?

In the documentary, Lyall Watson expressed his contention that in many ways the dolphin's abilities in social interaction exceed those of humans—indeed, he says they are like “a good person.” Do you think it is helpful to assess dolphins and other animals in terms of human characteristics? What does this tell us about both animals and humans?

In the documentary, Sir David Attenborough points out that many companies today are finding it advantageous to promote their products as not harmful to the environment. Do you shop for products like these? What might be some examples of such products?

This fresh water dolphin dates back to the beginning of time, yet little is known about it. It has been credited for saving the lives of sailors and is the only dolphin that can turn its neck 180 degrees. Unfortunately, it is being slaughtered for its mythological powers. However, Roxanne Kremer, one brave woman alone in the Amazon, has taken up the cause and through education she is challenging the locals and even the government.

A Magical Animal?

The Amazon River dolphin is ideally adapted to its environment. It is able to maneuver the waters of the river's often powerful current with ease. But its ability to adapt ends with the arrival of human activity in its habitat. Indigenous peoples, encroaching upon the area, hunt this sociable mammal for its supposed magical qualities and often slaughter it solely to possess a small part of its body. Other forces, such as mining, tree cutting, and overpopulation further diminish the dolphin's chances of survival. Yet slowly more and more people, including the peoples of the Amazon Rain Forest, are beginning to see that preserving pink dolphins can bring much greater benefits than killing them.

Important Places

Amazon River – At 3,900 miles long, the world's second-longest river. It begins in the Andes Mountains of Peru and flows across northern Brazil to the Atlantic Ocean. The riverbed is home to a dazzling variety of plant and animal life; it is estimated that one half of all the species on the Earth are in the Amazon rain forest.

Andes Mountains – Mountain range that runs through seven countries over 5,000 miles along the western side of South America.

Dolphin Corners – A lodge on the Yarapa River in Peru where Roxanne Kremer studies Amazon River dolphins. It serves as a hotel for tourists who are interested in the region and its biology.

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Internet Resources

<http://www.amazonwatch.org> -- Home page of Atossa Soltani's Amazon Watch.

<http://www.cetacea.org/boto.htm> – An informative page on the Amazon River dolphin.

<http://www.isptr-pard.org/> -- Home page of the Web Site of Roxanne Kremer's International Society for the Preservation of the Tropical Rainforest.

<http://www.animalinfo.org/species/cetacean/iniageof.htm> – A good site on the river dolphin with many links to other Web pages.

<http://www.dolphinsandwhales.co.za/cetaceans/riverdolphins/amazon.htm>

The Dolphin and Whale Gateway includes descriptions of various species, a good list of links, and news about whales and dolphins from around the world.

Other Resources

For students:

Donovan, Sandra. *Amazon River Dolphins*. Raintree/Steck Vaughn, 2002.

Kendall, Sarita. *Ransom for a River Dolphin*. Lerner Publications, 1993.

Montgomery, Sy. *Encantado: Pink Dolphin of the Amazon*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Perry, Phyllis J. *Freshwater Giants: Hippopotamuses, River Dolphins, and Manatees*. Franklin Watts, 2000.

Prevost, John F. *Freshwater Dolphins*. Checkerboard Library, 1996.

For adults:

Jefferson, T.A., S. Leatherwood, and M.A. Webber. *FAO Species Identification Guide: Marine Mammals of the World*. FAO, 1993.

Leatherwood, S. and R. Reeves. *The Sierra Club Handbook of Whales and Dolphins*. Sierra Club Books, 1983.

Montgomery, Sy. *Journey of the Pink Dolphins: An Amazon Quest*. Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Morell, Virginia. "Looking for Big Pink." *International Wildlife*.

November/December 1997: 26.

Sylvestre, Jean-Pierre. *Dolphins & Porpoises : A Worldwide Guide*. Sterling, 1993.

