

Rainforest Glossary

Adaptation: A body part or behavior that helps a plant or animal to survive

Amphibious: Capable of living on both land and water for at least a portion of its life cycle

Arboreal: An animal that lives in, or is adapted to living in trees

Arthropod: A group of animals that have exoskeletons, jointed legs, and segmented bodies; includes such animals as insects, spiders, ticks, centipedes, millipedes, crawfish, lobsters, and scorpions

Biodiversity: The term for the variety of life and the natural processes of which living things are a part. This includes the living organisms and the genetic differences between them and the communities in which they occur. The concept of biodiversity represents the ways that life is organized and interacts on our planet. These interactions can take place on scales ranging from the smallest, at the chromosome level, to organisms, ecosystems, and even to entire landscapes.

Bromeliad: A tropical plant in the same family as the pineapple; it often grows on the limbs and trunks of trees.

Buttress: The broadened base of a tree trunk that helps to support the tree

Calls: Animal vocalizations to other animals that are not songs. Calls are made during courtship, feeding, and migration or as warnings.

Camouflage: Protective coloration or shape that helps to hide an animal from its predators or prey

Canopy: The layer of the forest formed by the crown of tall trees, often 65-100 feet (20-30 meters) tall

Carnivore: An animal that eats only other animals; also an order of mammals that includes bears, cats, raccoons and the weasel family

Carrion: Dead and decaying flesh

Cold-blooded: See ectotherm and exotherm

Condensation: The process of changing from a gaseous to a liquid or solid state

Conservation: Planned management of a natural resource to prevent over-exploitation, destruction, or neglect

Consumer: An animal that eats other plants or animals in a food chain

Decomposer: Organisms, bacteria and fungi that feed on and break down organic substances such as dead plants and animals

Deforestation: The destruction of a forest often caused by slash-and-burn agriculture, cattle ranching, timber harvesting and development

Detritus: Dead plant, animal and other organic material

Diurnal: Active during the day

Ecosystem: A community of organisms (plants and animals), interacting with each other and the non-living things in their environment

Ectotherm: An animal that maintains its body temperature within fairly narrow limits by behavioral means such as basking or seeking shade

Emergent Layer: The layer above the general level of the canopy

Endangered species: Organisms that face extinction

Endotherm: An animal that is able to maintain a body temperature that varies only within narrow limits by means of internal mechanisms, (i.e. sweating, panting, or shivering). Birds and mammals are endotherms.

Energy Flow: The path of the energy in a food chain or web, originating in the sun, utilized by plants in creating food, then utilized by animals, through eating the plants and through eating those that eat the plant. Some of the energy is lost at each level of the chain.

Epiphyte: A plant that grows on other plants, but does not take nutrition from the host. The roots of many epiphytes can absorb water and nutrients from the air or rain.

Erosion: The wearing away of land by wind or water

Evaporation: The process by which any substance is converted from a liquid state into vapor; the evaporation of water.

Exoskeleton: The hard outer case of an animal that offers support and protection.

Extinct: No longer existing

Food Chain: The transfer of energy from the sun to plants to plant-eating animals, to animals that eat them, and so on. Each organism can be described by its position in the energy flow.

Food Web: A model more complex than a food chain that shows the relationship of plants and animals to each other. While a food chain will have one representative, a food web shows the multiple organisms that are interacting at each level.

Forest floor: The bottom layer of the forest

Frugivore: A fruit eater

Fungi: A diverse group of mainly terrestrial organisms separated from other plants by their lack of chlorophyll. They are generally saprophytic or parasitic.

Greenhouse effect: The heating of the lower atmosphere that occurs when carbon dioxide traps heat that would otherwise escape into space

Habitat: The environment in which an organism lives

Herbivore: An animal that eats only plants

Humidity: The amount of water vapor in the air

Humus: A soil that is made of decayed plant and animal matter, such as leaves, plants insects, etc. **Indigenous:** Describing an organism that is natural to an area, rather than introduced

Insectivore: An insect eater

Invertebrate: An animal without a backbone

Keratin: An organic material that is the base for hair, nails, hooves, and the exoskeletons of arthropods

Life Cycle: The sequence of changes making up the span of an organism's life from the fertilization of gametes to the same stage in the subsequent generation

Metamorphosis: The change of an insect (or other animal) from one form to another as it develops into an adult

Mimicry: The way one organism looks like another organism or natural object in order to gain some advantage, such as protection

Mutualism: Interaction of two or more species that benefits both partners. See symbiosis.

Niche: The function or role of a given species in a community

Nocturnal: Active at night

Omnivore: An animal that eats both animals and plants

Organic: Derived from living organisms

Parasite: An organism that grows, feeds, and is sheltered on or in a different organism while contributing nothing to the survival of its host. The tolerance of the host varies from being almost unaffected to serious illness and often death.

Photosynthesis: The process by which green plants synthesize carbohydrates (food) from carbon dioxide and water using light as an energy source, and releasing oxygen as a byproduct.

Pollination: The transfer of pollen to the pistil of a flower

Precipitation: Any form of water, such as rain, snow, sleet, or hail that falls to the earth's surface

Predator: An organism that captures another organism to obtain food

Prey: An animal taken by a predator as food

Primate: An order of mammals with highly developed brains, generally 5 fingers and toes covered by flat nails, limbs usually at the front, with opposable thumbs for grasping; includes monkeys, great apes, and humans

Runoff: Rainfall not absorbed by soil

Saprophyte: An organism that derives its nourishment by absorbing the products or remains of other organisms. Many bacteria and fungi are saprophytes and are important in food chains in returning nutrients to the soil by purification or decay.

Scavenger: An animal that primarily eats dead organisms

Secondary Consumer: Refers to a predator; an animal that does not take nourishment directly from the plant but from those who feed upon the plant

Skeleton: A hard structure that supports and maintains the shape of an animal. It may be external to the body (exoskeleton) or within the body (endoskeleton.)

Specialization: A species may be so suited to its environment that it cannot change easily when the environment changes. This species is called specialized; particularly suited to its environment.

Species: One population of organisms, all the members of which are able to breed amongst themselves and produce fertile offspring

Symbiosis: Different species living together in close association that benefit both of them; a special kind of mutualism.

Territory: An area occupied and defended by an animal for such purposes as mating, nesting, and feeding. Territories are common among vertebrates, particularly birds.

Tropical rainforest: An evergreen forest with abundant rainfall and a warm, humid climate located between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn

Trophic level: A stage in a food chain; the first trophic level is occupied by the plants (primary producers) which provide the energy source for all higher levels, the herbivores (primary consumers) and the carnivores (secondary consumers)

Water cycle: The continuous circulation of water in systems throughout the planet, involving condensation, precipitation, runoff, evaporation and transpiration

Understory: The forest layer beneath the canopy that includes small trees and shrubs.

Vertebrate: Any animal having a bony or cartilaginous skeleton with a segmented spinal column and a brain enclosed in a skull or cranium. The five classes of vertebrates are fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals.