

# EXTREME EARTH

## Greatest River: Amazon River



### How Great is the Amazon River?

The Amazon is the greatest river in the world by so many measures; the volume of water it carries to the sea (approximately 20% of all the freshwater discharge into the oceans), the area of land that drains into it, and its length and width. It is one of the longest rivers in the world and, depending upon who you talk to, is anywhere between 6,259km/3,903mi and 6,712km/4,195mi long.

For the last century the length of the Amazon and the Nile Rivers have been in a tight battle for title of world's longest river. The exact length of the two rivers varies over time and reputable sources disagree as to their actual length. The Nile River in Africa is reported to be anywhere from at 5,499km/3,437mi to 6,690km/4,180mi long. But there is no question as to which of the two great rivers carries the greater volume of water - the Amazon River.

At its widest point the Amazon River can be 11km/6.8 mi wide during the dry season. The area covered by the Amazon River and its tributaries more than triples over the course of a year. In an average dry season 110,000 square km of land are water-covered, while in the wet season the flooded area of the Amazon Basin rises to 350,000 square km. When the flood plains and the Amazon River Basin flood during the rainy season the Amazon River can be up to 40km/24.8 mi wide. Where the Amazon opens at its estuary the river is over 325km/202 mi wide!

Because the Amazon drains the entire Northern half of the South American continent (approx. 40% landmass), including all the torrential tropical rains that deluge the rainforests, it carries an enormous amount of water. The mouth of the Amazon River, where it meets the sea, is so wide and deep that ocean-going ships have navigated its waters and traveled as far inland as two-thirds the way up the entire length of the river.

### The Amazon - Home of Extremes

The Amazon River is not only the greatest in the world, it is home to many other "Extremes" of the natural world. Have you ever seen a catfish? They're usually found in warm, slow moving waters of lakes and streams, and some people keep them as pets in aquariums. Catfish are pretty creepy looking fish with big flat heads and "whiskers" on either side of their heads (hence the name, catfish). Most catfish that we're familiar with here in the U.S. are anywhere from eight inches long to about five feet, weighing in at up to 60 pounds. But the catfish that live in the world's greatest river have all the room in the world to grow as big as nature will allow - they have



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been captured weighing over 200 pounds! One of the largest freshwater fish in the world is found living in the waters of the Amazon River. Arapaima, also known locally as Pirarucu, *Arapaima gigas* are the largest, exclusively fresh water fish in the world. They have been found to reach a length of 15 ft/4m and can weigh up to 440lbs/200kg. ([Read about the biggest freshwater fish in the world.](#))

### Amazon River Facts

So, how did the Amazon get to be so big? The first reason has to do with its location - right at the equator. Around the "belt line" of the earth lies a warm, tropical zone where over 400 in/1016cm of rain fall every year. That averages out to more than an inch (3cm) of rain, everyday! A lot of water falls onto the land surrounding the river, what is called the "Amazon River drainage basin". A good way to understand what a drainage basin is to think of the whole northern half of the continent of South America as a shallow dish, or saucer. Whenever rain falls and lands anywhere in the river basin it all runs into the lowest place in the pan, which happens to be the Amazon River. The sheer volume of rain in the Amazon jungle, as well as the slope of the surrounding land, combine to create the enormous river known as the Amazon.

