

# Rainforest Lessons

The following lessons were developed (or adapted from other sources) for my Jr. Kindergarten classes, who study the rainforests for a month each spring. However, I should think most would work as well or better with older students. A certain amount of rainforest knowledge is necessary to really teach these lessons well, but such knowledge is not difficult to come by. In particular it is a good idea to understand the basic 4 levels of the rainforest, and to have a pretty good idea which animals live in which levels. When I work with Jr. Kindergarten I don't worry about keeping New World and Old World animals distinct--I don't mind if our rainforest contains both tigers and jaguars, or both lemurs and sloths, as long as it doesn't contain cheetahs or camels, or other non-rainforest animals. You might want to be more picky with older students and specify the geographical location of your dramatic jungle.

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## A Tree in Levels

I invented this lesson on the spur of the moment once when another lesson ran short and I had extra time. I have since refined it and it works well. It is designed to teach or review the four levels of the rainforest, and which animals live in which levels.

## Preparation

This part is not really necessary, but it makes the lesson nicer and more formal. Using masking tape (or chalk, if your floor will bear it), draw a large outline of a rainforest tree on the floor. It should take up as much space as you have. Be sure it has a clearly defined shape, with roots, a trunk, and a canopy shape. Also be sure there is at least a little floor space "above" it. If you want to, you can make lines that divide it into Forest Floor, Understory, Canopy and Emergent Layer, but I usually leave that for the children.

## Discussion

Take as much or as little time as necessary for this. Discuss the four main levels of the rainforest--Floor, Understory, Canopy, and Emergent Layer. Discuss some of the animals that live in each level.

## Game

One at a time, children get up and announce the animal they have chosen to be. Then, moving like that animal, they go and stand/sit/slither in the appropriate part of the tree diagram. (If there is no diagram, simply establish where the bottom is and use your imagination.) Give them help as necessary to choose the right level.

## Variations

With older students, you can make the game more challenging in a couple of ways:

- Prepare a number of index cards, each with the name of an animal on it. Students draw cards and must be the animal on the card. In this way, they must figure out which level their animal belongs in, rather than just picking an animal whose level they already know.
- You could play that they are "out" if they don't end up in the right level after a certain time has elapsed--say 15 seconds. Repeat until a winner is crowned (or until you tire of the game).
- This one is hard, but fun! Divide the class into small groups. Each student takes a card, and the group must arrange themselves in the "correct" order top to bottom. Animals from the same level stand next to each other. The catch is that they cannot communicate with each other. Each person must act his or her own animal so well that her or his partners can recognize it, and at the same time must work at recognizing his or her partners' animals, so that they can all move into the appropriate locations relative to each other. (Obviously you don't use an outline on the floor for this, or everyone would just go to the right level of the outline. The point is that they must arrange themselves in order relative to each other.) If you want to make this game a competition, try this: When a group believes they have themselves correctly arranged, they shout, "Freeze!" Everyone freezes while the teacher checks the cards and makes sure they've got it right. If so, they win. If not, they are disqualified and everyone "unfreezes" and continues.

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## Be the Rainforest

This lesson is a slight revision of one I learned from the folks I work with at Night Flight at the Philadelphia Zoo. It needs a bigish group (more than 8 or ten) to work really well, and actually works best if there are some adults in the group. (I did it on Parents' Day this year, with great success.)

## Discussion

- What is a rainforest?
- What animals live there? (The children suggest dozens of animals, most of which actually do live in rainforests. You can decide for yourself whether to correct them when they say "cheetah," or "polar bear.")
- Why do these animals live in the rainforest instead of, say, in the desert? (We discuss the way that the trees and the rain make the animals' lives possible. Many animals live in the trees themselves. Others depend for food on the trees, or on the animals that live in them. Without--with Jr. K, anyway--using a lot of big words like "ecosystem," we come to the conclusion that the animals that live in the rainforest need the trees.

- What do humans use trees for? (Our discussion usually covers furniture, rubber, paper, houses, etc. If the students are sophisticated enough, we might also talk about slash-and-burn agriculture and cattle ranching that cuts down trees to make pasture land.)

## **Making the Rainforest**

- First, several people (about half the group, generally) are chosen to be trees. If adults are present, I make them be the trees, but I've never had children object to playing that role if there are no adults. Trees spread themselves out in the acting space and spread their arms to form branches.
- Next, the rest of the group become animals. I generally appoint them one at a time. "Okay, we need some ground animals. Who wants to be a turtle? Who wants to be a deer? What other animals live on the ground?" We populate the forest with animals from all layers of the rainforest (but don't actually have them climb the trees), leaving only one or two students left over.
- The remaining student or students become loggers, and stand to the ready.

## **And. . .Action!**

- "Now it is time to bring the rainforest to life. First, let's see what a healthy rainforest is like."
- Everyone moves around, and makes noises (within reason) like their real-life counterparts. The trees may make the sound of the rain (since otherwise they have nothing to do but stand there). I generally let this go on for around a minute.
- "But now let's see what this logger (or loggers) is up to! He's got a big saw. Start it up!"
- The logger moves from tree-to-tree and "cuts them down." The trees die in dramatic fashion. (If children are playing the trees, be sure you control their deaths carefully. They can be big and histrionic, but they should not fall in such a way as to hurt themselves or others.)
- "Now look around, animals! There are no trees left. Can you live without trees?"
- I point out, one by one, why each animal cannot live without the trees, and, one by one, they "die." When all the animals are gone, I might say something like:
- "Oh, no! Without all those animals and plants, we can't make medicines we need! Without those trees, there isn't much oxygen! What are we humans to do?"
- Then I might myself "die." It depends on the group and how much I can trust them not to run amok once the teacher is "dead."
- I always end this lesson by reconstructing the forest.
- "But let's see what happens if people stop slash-and-burn agriculture. If people plant new trees when they take old ones. If people are more careful, and don't take too many trees. Trees, come back to life!"
- "Animals, look! There are trees! Maybe some of you can come back now, too!"
- Then we close with a discussion of things we can do to help preserve the rainforest.

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## **Rainforest Variations on Other Lessons**

Several of the other lessons on this site can be adapted for a rainforest unit. Below are some suggestions on how to adapt some of them, with direct links to the lesson plans mentioned. These adaptations are mostly pretty obvious, but I think they provide some insight into the way you can tailor your curriculum to support other curricular subjects without compromising the dramatic education you are providing.

### **The Lion King's Court**

With or without the story that goes with it, this activity about a king choosing appropriate animal courtiers--who must know enough about themselves to make a good case for their inclusion--will clearly work for other animals than those on the African Savanna. Instead of a lion, I make the King a jaguar. (Actually, although the lion is traditionally "King of the Jungle," or "King of the Forest," the lion is a plains animal.) His courtiers could be a bear, a monkey, and an eagle (for example). I usually keep the camel in--some rainforests do abut deserts, after all.

### **No, You Can't Take Me!**

You can use this game as a way to teach the importance of various rainforest species. (Works better with upper elementary or older.) Instead of objects in a room, students become plants or animals in the rainforest. (With advanced students, you could break the class into groups and have each be in a different part of the world, or one group could be a tropical and one a temperate rainforest, but just having the whole class be a generic "rainforest" works fine.) When the teacher comes to shoot, trap, or cut down each student, they explain why the world would be a lesser place without them.

### **Around the World in Thirty Minutes**

Instead of conducting a tour of the whole world, conduct a tour of the world's rainforests. To make the project more challenging for older students, you could assign each student or group a particular rainforest, which they would have to research.

### **A Tree Grows**

Instead of an apple tree, you could do this narrative pantomime about a rainforest tree, and talk about all of the animals who make their home in, on or under the tree, and how they help the tree to grow and in turn receive food and shelter from it.