

Madagascar Information and History

The Island of Madagascar

The Republic of Madagascar is a tropical island in the Indian Ocean about 500 kilometres off the southern coast of Africa. It is Africa's largest island covering over 587,040 square kilometres (approximately 226,658 square miles) and is the world's fourth largest island after Greenland, Papua New Guinea and Borneo. The capital city Antananarivo, which has a population of around 4,000,000, can be found in the middle of the island.

History of the Island

Madagascar was formed by the continental drift rather than a volcanic eruption like its neighbouring islands of Mauritius, Réunion, Rodrigues and the Comoros.

The island tore off mainland Africa around 165 million years ago and drifted off like a giant ark. The only animals on board were dinosaurs and a few primitive birds and mammals. The mainland ancestors of primates and a few other animal groups made it to the island after the divide. It is thought that these animals arrived on the island by rafting on floating logs or vegetation.

Later the island became inhabited by the Malagasy people who first arrived on the island between 1500 and 2000 years ago. Native Malagasy people are a mixture of Asians and Africans.

Weather

The island has a tropical climate along the coastline which makes it an ideal environment for rainforests. Inland the climate is temperate while the southern side of the island is arid and covered in desert land. Madagascar has two seasons, the rainy season (December-April) where the island receives

between 300-3,500 mm of rainfall and the dry season (May-November) when average midday temperatures range from 25°C in the highlands and 30°C on the coast.

Geography

The island has 4,828km of coastline with long stretches of sandy beach, clear water and coral reefs. A steep mountain range runs parallel to the eastern coast. Madagascar's highest mountain, Mount Maromokofro, towers an impressive 2,876m (9,450 feet) over the island's northernmost regions. The lowest point on the island is level with the Indian Ocean (0m above sea level).

Madagascar contains vastly different habitats which sustain the island's huge number of endemic animal and plant life. Madagascar and the nearby island of

Comoros have nearly a quarter of all the flowering plants in Africa including baobab trees, unique cacti and aloes in the drier areas. Madagascar has many National Parks that preserve some of the island's original rainforests.

Natural disasters

Madagascar is prone to natural disasters including cyclones, drought and locust infestation, and was also affected by the 2004's Indian Ocean Tsunami which hit the island's east coast.

Human Effect on the Environment

Madagascar was once covered in rainforests but due to deforestation around 90% of the island's rainforests have been destroyed. When humans inhabited the island they began to use a slash-and-burn technique on the rainforest to clear land on the island. This has caused severe soil erosion and the island is now often referred to as the Great Red Island. However, conservation issues are now better understood and some nature reserves have been set up on the island, and more Malagasy people are being trained in nature conservation techniques.

Wildlife of Madagascar

Many of the animals and plants found on Madagascar are endemic, which means they are native to the island and cannot be found anywhere else on the earth. These species are particularly vulnerable because their numbers are small and if their habitat is destroyed they have nowhere else to go being surrounded by the sea.

Many of Madagascar's primates are endangered, including the Indris which is now restricted to a belt of rainforest. Madagascar is home to 90% of the known species of lemurs, which are related to the Indris. Thirty species of lemurs on the island are listed as endangered to some degree. The main threats to these animals are the loss of food plants due to the growing timber trade and forest destruction.

Island culture

Madagascar has a population of around 17.5million people. The Malagasy people are a mixture of Asians and Africans who have inhabited the island for around 2,000 years. The most common languages spoken are French and Malagasy and the most followed religions are traditional Malagasy religions, Christianity and Islam.

Although there are some towns and cities, much of the population live in the countryside, usually in villages. A majority of Malagasy people are farmers who live mainly off the land producing coffee, vanilla, sugarcane, cloves, cocoa, rice, cassava (tapioca), beans, bananas, peanuts and livestock products that they export

to other countries, using one of the country's many airports. In fact, at the moment there is more import than export and the Malagasy economy is suffering.

However, many Malagasy people are finding jobs in the growing tourism industry. Their children have to go to school from the ages of six to fourteen, and the island has a university, with six different campuses.

Many Malagasy people still maintain the local traditions of playing music and storytelling, weaving and wood carving. They eat mainly rice, with pork, chicken, beef or seafood, often in hot curries or stews and also a lot of the island's abundant tropical fruit such as lychees and pineapples.

Useful websites

<http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildplaces/mad/index.cfm>

<http://www.anthrotech.com/madagascar/>

<http://www.pbs.org/edens/madagascar/>

A. Questions

- ① How was Madagascar formed?
- ② Describe its climate?
- ③ What kind of unique tree grows in Madagascar?
- ④ How have humans impacted the environment?
- ⑤ What percent of the world's lemurs can be found on the island?
- ⑥ What ethnic group makes up most of the island?
- ⑦ What kind of crops are grown in Madagascar?
- ⑧ What industry is providing jobs in Madagascar?
What level of economic activity is that (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th)?
- ⑨ Describe the food eaten by the people.
- ⑩ Would you want to visit Madagascar? Explain.

B. - Animal families and facts

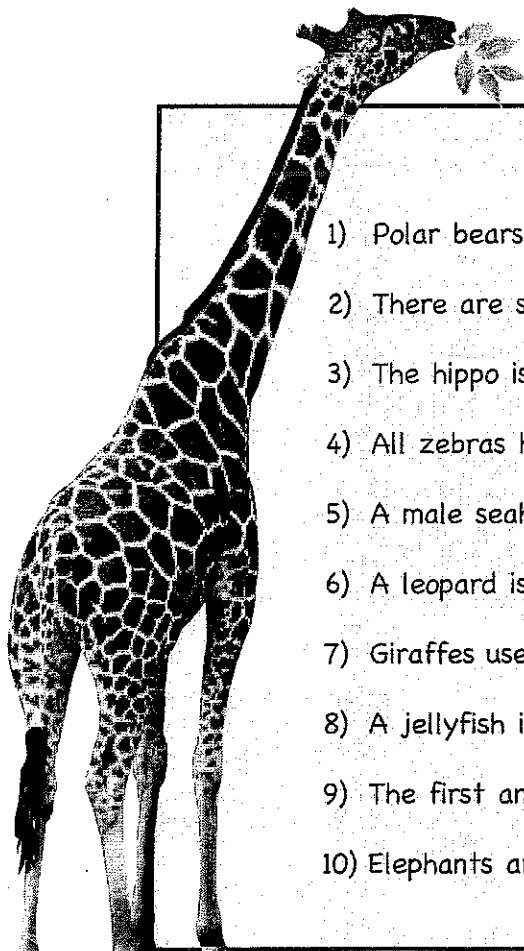
A group of birds is called a flock of birds. Words that describe a group or family of animals are called collective nouns. Look at the list of animals below. Match the animals with their collective nouns on the right. Then check your answers below.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1) A of lions. | 6) A of geese. |
| 2) A of zebras. | 7) A of whales. |
| 3) A of giraffes. | 8) A of ants. |
| 4) A of hippos. | 9) A of camels. |
| 5) A of penguins. | 10) A of pups. |

pride, tower, huddle, herd, gaggle, school, litter, herd, colony, caravan

C. Animal families and facts (cont)

Read the sentences below about different animals. Are they True or False? What do you think? Circle T or F for each of the sentences and then check your answers with your teacher.



- | | True | False |
|--|------|-------|
| 1) Polar bears eat penguins. | T | F |
| 2) There are seven bones in a giraffe's neck. | T | F |
| 3) The hippo is native to South America. | T | F |
| 4) All zebras have the same pattern. | T | F |
| 5) A male seahorse gives birth to its young. | T | F |
| 6) A leopard is the fastest land mammal. | T | F |
| 7) Giraffes use leaves on trees to clean its ears. | T | F |
| 8) A jellyfish is mostly made up of water. | T | F |
| 9) The first animal in space was a chimpanzee. | T | F |
| 10) Elephants are afraid of mice. | T | F |