

LOST

IN THE AMAZON

A BATTLE FOR
SURVIVAL in the HEART
of the RAINFOREST

TOD OLSON

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CHAPTER 1

THE GREEN HELL

From the air, the Amazon rainforest looks as though it goes on forever. Move it 2,500 miles north, and you'd have a dense carpet of treetops—400 billion of them—stretching almost unbroken from New York to Florida and from the Atlantic Ocean all the way west to Utah: two-thirds of the continental United States covered in forest. An English naturalist named Richard Spruce came to the Amazon in 1849 to collect plants, insects, and animals and send them back to Europe for museumgoers to gawk at. Just the thought of how vast it was left him breathless. “The largest river in the world flows through the largest forest. Fancy if you can *two millions of square miles of forest*, uninterrupted save by the streams that traverse it.”

Europeans first encountered this giant wilderness 470 years before LANSA Flight 508 tried to fly over it. The Amazon had been supporting indigenous communities—“Indians,” the newcomers called them—for at least 11,000 years. But to the Europeans it was brand-new.



The Amazon, the dark part at the top of the map, covers an area two-thirds the size of the United States.

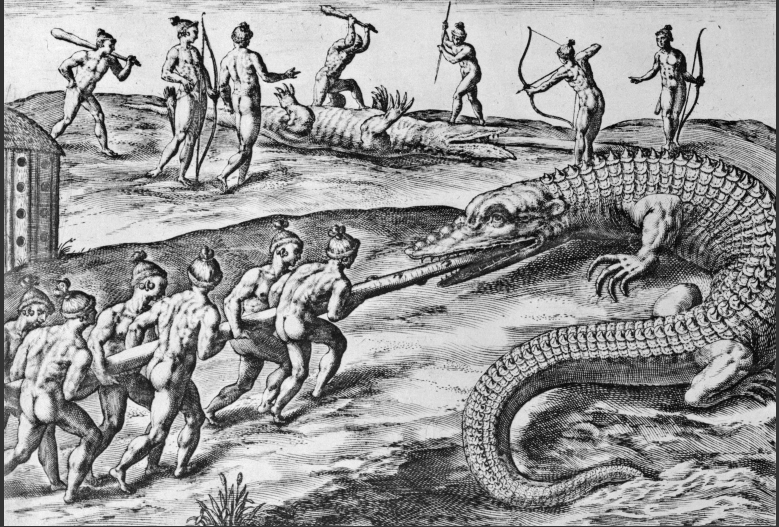
They were both fascinated and terrified. “Of all the marvels of nature,” wrote the 20th-century explorer Gene Savoy, “the jungle has the power to evoke both fear and wonder in man.”

Fear, wonder, and an urge to exaggerate.

A slave trader named Francesco Carletti went to Peru in 1594 and came back with a bizarre description of the rainforest. There were frogs and toads of “frightening size,” he claimed, so many of them that people think “they rain down from the sky.” Bloodsucking creatures of all kinds preyed on human flesh—from vampire bats to insects that grew fat on blood. “Mandrill cats” crossed rivers by linking “themselves together by their tails” and swinging from trees to the other side.

Later reports warned about all the ways a human could be eaten alive in the Amazon. Alligators with an “insatiable desire” for human flesh lurked on every riverbank, according to the Spanish naturalists Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa. A man-eating snake the Indians called *jacumama* lay in wait on the forest floor, disguised as rotten wood. “It will swallow any beast whole, and . . . this has been the miserable end of many a man,” wrote Juan and Ulloa. Or so they had heard.

Europeans were just as suspicious of the people who lived in the rainforest, and fear made their imaginations run wild. Explorers returned from South America with fantastical stories about giants, dwarfs, and people whose feet grew backward—the better to confuse anyone who tried to follow their footprints. A tribe of headless men was said to live in the region of Guayana,



How the natives of the New World killed alligators, according to a 16th-century engraving by Theodore de Bry, who had never set foot in the Americas.

on the northern edge of the Amazon. According to the English explorer Sir Walter Raleigh, they had “eyes in their shoulders and their mouths in the middle of their breasts.”

Another common story involved a fierce tribe of warrior women. The Spanish explorer Francisco de Orellana supposedly ran across them in 1542 as he traveled from one end of the rainforest to the other. These women towered over everyone and fought as effectively as ten Indian men. They reminded the Spaniards of a group of women warriors from Greek mythology, known as the Amazons. From then on, Europeans had a name for the 4,000-mile-long river that formed the backbone of the forest.