

Savannah

Man and savannah

Peoples of the African savannah

The habitat of the savannah favours farming and breeding and this is why it has been remarkably altered. The people living in this biome are mainly farmers who grow cereals and other plants that can resist long dry spells, such as millet, sorghum, barley and wheat, as well as peanuts, cotton, rice and sugarcane, while breeding prevails in drier savannah areas. Farm animals are generally cattle (zebus), sheep, goats and donkeys;

Many peoples live in the savannahs: the Nubians in the upper Sudanese Nubia, the Kung and the Akan in the Ivory Coast, the Bushmen and the Hottentots in Namibia.

Tourists in the savannah

An important human activity related to the savannah certainly is tourism: the savannah and in particular the wildlife sanctuaries offer the opportunity to observe, film and take pictures of an exotic and particularly fascinating nature, thus becoming an important attraction for tourists and enthusiasts. The safaris, tours within nature reserves, offer the opportunity to capture with one's camera or just with one's eyes wonderful animals in the wild state. Tourism thus becomes an extremely important economical resource for these regions, which are often poor.

A precious biome

Mainly cereals (such as oat and maize), dates, olives and vegetables are grown in the savannah.

Breeding includes goats, sheep, horses and cattle. The savannah can be economically useful not only for farming and breeding but also for the natural resources it offers. The baobab for instance is used for different purposes: as a drug to treat a number of diseases, for the light wood used to make music instruments and pirogues. Its fruits can be eaten raw or used to make drinks; its roots are eaten like asparagus.

The savannah is also very important for birds, whose survival depends on migrations to avoid the harsh winters of temperate areas.

The wildlife sanctuaries of the savannah are indispensable for the protection of dying species and for scientific and ethnological research in a wild environment.

The origins of the savannah

Before the last glaciations, the Earth certainly looked very different from the way it looks today. In the past, the areas where there are deserts and savannahs now were covered with forests, while an expanse of ice covered the medium and high altitudes. As the climate got drier, the forests slowly disappeared and the savannahs got in.

In particular, geological events occurred in the African forests, approximately 7 or 8 million years ago, which can now be explained by plate tectonics and which caused savannahs and man to appear on Earth. The **rift valley**, that later on would cause the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, etc.) to come off the continent, began to form. This area, that extends north to south along the Great Lake line, was tormented for a long time by an intense volcanic activity, which brought along significant climatic changes. The west winds, loaded with rain, no longer reached the inland, which as a consequence dried up. The forest thus disappeared and was replaced by the savannah, a new environment, unsuitable for the tree monkeys and favourable therefore to those species that began able to use their back limbs, thus getting on their way to walk on two legs. Conversely, the bigger monkeys kept evolving as the forests retreated. In the grassy areas, to walk upright was useful to explore the environment and quickly locate dangers. New forms of life, better suited to living outdoors, began to appear, goaded by the new life style, and originated the evolutionary line of the hominids. In addition to these geological events, the savannah has been developed in more recent times by man, who cut trees for timber, put

lands to pasture and burnt down the forests. Man's action has actually extended what was the natural area of this biome and still keeps it like it.

The evolution of hominids

There is plenty of evidence of this evolutionary process. A nearly full skeleton of a female hominid who lived approximately 3.5 million years ago was found in Ethiopia in 1974; scientists called it Lucy. The shape of its spine, leg bones, pelvis and limbs show that Lucy used to walk like we do now. The fossilised footprints of three human beings who had walked through the ash deposits of a recent volcanic eruption were discovered at Laetoli (Tanzania) in 1978. These footprints date back to between 3.6 and 3.8 million years ago and are the most ancient evidence ever found of the existence of two-legged primates.