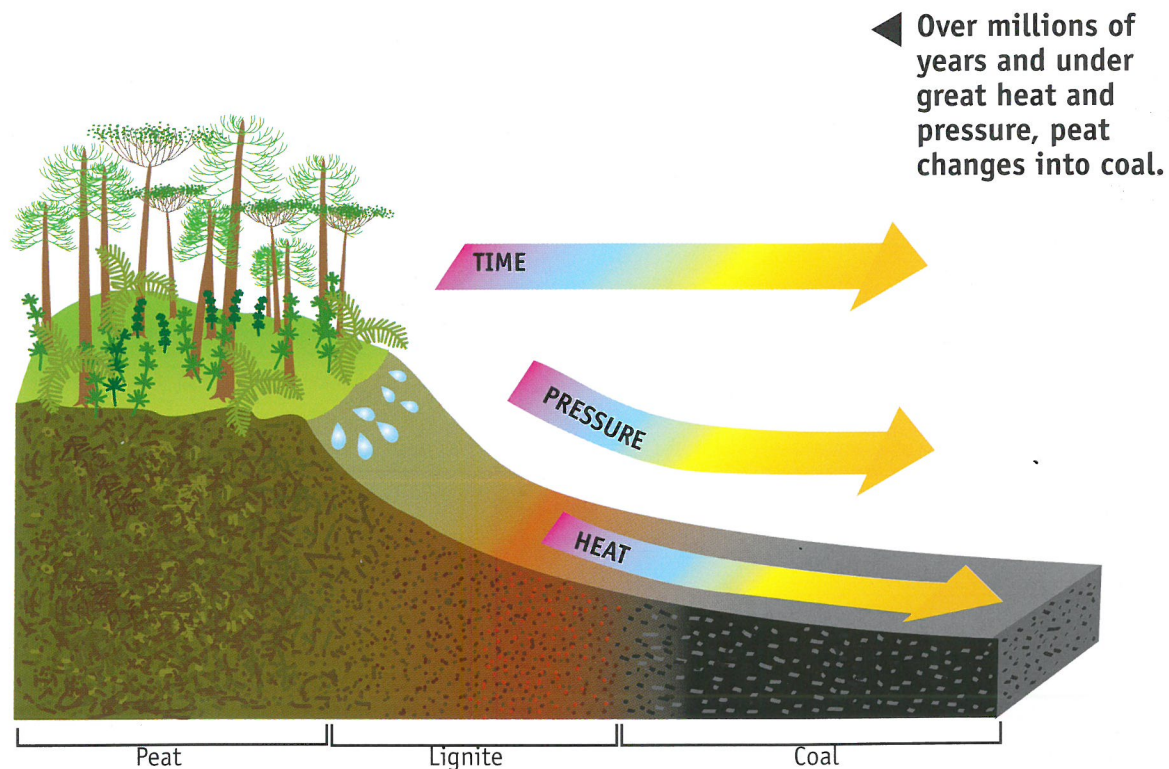


How did coal form?

The coal we use today started forming between about 300 and 100 million years ago. The different materials used to make coal were **deposited** at different times.

Enormous swamps filled with plant life once covered Earth's **tropical** areas, meaning areas with hot, often wet climates. Millions of years ago, northern Russia and central North America were tropical.

When the plants in these areas died, they formed thick layers, called **peat**. Over time, soil and water covered the peat, which did not rot away. The dirt and water were heavy, and this put the dead plants under great **pressure**. Earth's heat combined with that pressure and formed coal. The greatest heat and pressure produced the hardest coal. The least heat and pressure created soft coal, called **lignite** (see page 8).



How much coal is there?

Top five coal reserve countries	Approximate amount in reserve in millions of tons as of 2006
United States	271,877
Russia	173,074
China	126,215
India	101,903
Australia	86,531

Source: BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2007

Over millions of years, Earth slowly shifted, and so areas with coal deposits are no longer tropical. As this map of worldwide coal deposits shows, some of today's tropical areas, such as those in Africa and South America, have no coal at all. These regions did not have large amounts of plant life when coal first began to form.

▼ Areas with coal deposits were once tropical swamps.

