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North America: Human Geography

North America's human landscape closely mirrors that of its physical environment: varied, rich, and constantly changing.

GRADES

9 - 12+

SUBJECTS

Geography, Human Geography, Social Studies, Economics, World History



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PHOTOGRAPH

Navajo Family

Navajo family gather outside their home in Monument Valley Tribal Park in Utah.

GRANDRIVER/GETTY IMAGES

ARTICLE VOCABULARY

Learning materials

MAPS

- Explore North America with National Geographic MapMaker

North America, the third-largest continent, extends from the tiny Aleutian Islands in the northwest to the Isthmus of Panama in the south.

North America's physical geography, environment and resources, and human geography can be considered separately.

North America and South America are named after Italian navigator Amerigo Vespucci. Vespucci was the first European to suggest that the Americas were not part of the East Indies, but an entirely separate landmass. The portions of the landmass that widened out north of the Isthmus of Panama became known as North America.

Today, North America is home to the citizens of Canada, the United States, Greenland, Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the island countries and territories of the Caribbean Sea and western North Atlantic.

North America's human landscape closely mirrors that of its physical environment: varied, rich, and constantly changing. From their beginnings to the present day, the peoples of North America have worked with and against their surroundings in order to survive and prosper.

Historic Cultures

Indigenous cultures shaped, and were shaped by, the geography of North America. The first North Americans are believed to have migrated from Siberia, in northeast Asia, by crossing a land bridge over the Bering Strait. These populations fanned out southward, to the present-day U.S. states of Florida and California, as well as Mexico and Central America.

The Olmec and the Maya, indigenous to Central America, built the first cities on the continent, eventually leading to the great urban areas of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. These cities, in what is now central Mexico, boasted sophisticated engineering structures, such as canals, apartment buildings, and irrigation systems.

Many of these early North American cultures were scientifically and agriculturally advanced. Mayan calendars and almanacs recorded celestial events such as eclipses and seasonal changes. The Mayans were also

mathematically advanced. Their counting system was able to represent very large numbers using only three symbols: dots, lines, and a football-shaped symbol that indicated a zero. The Mayans were, in fact, the first culture to have a written symbol for zero.

Cultures throughout southern North America harvested corn, squash, and beans in regular cycles. This sort of agriculture allowed major civilizations to develop. People were no longer bound to produce food and shelter for their families—some people could work in the food and construction industries while others became engineers, artists, and political leaders. Leading North American civilizations include the Maya and Aztec, in what is now Mexico, and the Iroquois, native to southeastern Canada and the northeastern United States.

The vastness of the northern part of the continent encouraged other indigenous communities to live nomadic lifestyles. These cultures did not establish urban areas or agricultural centers. Instead, they followed favorable weather patterns, natural agricultural cycles, and animal migrations.

The Plains Indians, for example, followed the seasonal grazing and migration of the American bison (*Bison bison*). Plains Indians include Lakota, Blackfoot, and Nez Perce. Plains Indians ate bison meat as their primary source of food, and used hides and bones to create dwellings, tools, and clothing. The range of the bison, which stretched from the southern Prairie Provinces of Canada, through the Great Plains, to the U.S.-Mexico border, coincided with the extent of Plains Indian communities. They were so interdependent that the eventual extinction of bison in many areas of

the United States—through overhunting, development, and anti-indigenous federal policies—dramatically weakened the power and influence of the Plains people.

The environment also impacted the traditional beliefs and social structure of North American indigenous communities. For instance, the Inuit, native to the Arctic, were deeply influenced by the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights. They believed the amazing light displays were images of their family and friends in the afterlife, the souls of animals and spirits, and visual guide for hunting. Inuit also believed that all things have souls, and that spirits existed to protect those souls. By respecting the ecosystem (the living and nonliving things in an environment), Inuit communities aimed to maintain a balanced existence.

Contemporary Cultures

Contemporary North American societies are also greatly influenced by the continent's rich and varied environment. Our globalized world has pressed these societies to develop complex ways of interacting with, and profiting from, geographic resources.

North America's economic base is centered largely on the extraction, development, and trade of natural resources. Local communities, as well as national governments and regional organizations, also use natural resources. Guatemala, for example, has a traditional medicine system, which includes herbalists and spiritualists who use medicinal plants to treat ailments. Costa Rica has developed a network of sustainable and fair-trade coffee growers tailored to a growing international market.

Tourism is also an important part of North America's economy, especially fo the small island nations of the Caribbean Sea. These island nations offer pristine tropical environments. Their multicolored coral reefs are one of the premier diving destinations in the world. The islands' political and economic ties to the United States and Europe ease travel arrangements and language barriers. The islands see about 20 million visitors every year. In 2010, tourism contributed more than $39 billion to the region's economy.

Some organizations promote tourism that is more beneficial to local economies and ecosystems. The Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism for example, aims to promote the sustainable management of the region's natural resources. Sustainable tourism supports development of local businesses, as opposed to global corporations such as international hotel chains.

The Caribbean tourism industry is also developing more ecotourism opportunities for visitors. Ecotourism encourages tourists to have a minimal impact on the natural environment. Ecotourism promotes travel to natural destinations, such as coral reefs, instead of developed destinations such as casinos.

North America's multicultural history is another defining feature of the continent's human geography. Immigrants have sought opportunities, particularly in the United States and Canada, for hundreds of years. Immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America have contributed to the development of the continent. Immigrants or children of immigrants to North America have become scientific, business, and cultural leaders.

The strong presence of immigrants is reflected in present-day ethnic neighborhoods: the Cuban “Little Havana” in Miami, Florida, U.S.; the Soma “Little Mogadishu” in Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.; the Korean “Koreatown” in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; and the North African “Little Maghreb” in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, are just a few. Mexico City’s “Barrio Chino” is on of the smallest Chinatowns in the world, only two city blocks in length. Yet Barrio Chino counts 3,000 families of Chinese heritage within its boundaries.

Many immigrants are refugees. According to the United Nations, a refugee is a person who resides outside the country of their nationality for fear of being persecuted. Refugees may fear economic hardship, or political or social pressure. Refugees may also immigrate because of a natural disaster.

Major refugee populations in Canada have included residents fleeing civil war in Sri Lanka, political oppression in Pakistan, and violence in Colombia. Major refugee populations in the United States have included residents fleeing poverty in Ethiopia, political oppression in Vietnam and Cuba, and earthquakes in Haiti.

Since 2006, Ottawa, Canada, has been the site for World Refugee Week, which features the work of artists, academics, and activists from around the globe. This celebration of diversity is echoed in the many ethnic and cultural celebrations that take place across North America.

Political Geography

North America's history and development have been shaped by its political

geography. Political geography is the internal and external relationships between its various governments, citizens, and territories.

Historic Issues

Widespread contact between the Indigenous people of North America and European explorers was the defining moment for the continent's political geography. Italian explorer Christopher Columbus' first landing on Caribbean soil in 1492 set in motion the voyages of other Europeans: Spanish explorers Hernando De Soto and Ponce de Leoón; French explorer Jacques Cartier; and British explorers Sebastian Cabot and Henry Hudson.

The voyages of these explorers inspired various European countries to claim and colonize North American soil. European colonists found different ways to work with and against North America's Indigenous communities.

Colonialism in what is now the U.S. pushed native populations to the west. Through disease, war, and forced relocation, many native communities were exterminated. The large Indigenous territories were reduced to isolated reservations.

European colonists in present-day Canada set up a reservation system that protected many Indian settlements but isolated them from development. Intermarriage between Europeans and natives created a French-Indian community known today as the Metis.

In Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, native populations were more fully integrated into the political and social systems. Mestizos, people of European and indigenous descent, have greatly contributed to the social

structure and culture of Latin America.

Cooperation and conflict have dramatically affected the relationships between North American countries. The United States and Canada have the longest nonmilitarized border in the world, for instance. This peaceful border reflects a stable, cooperative relationship between the two countries.

North America's history is dotted with conflict, however. The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) resulted in the United States acquiring 1,294,994 square kilometers (500,000 square miles) of Mexican territory, extending from the Rio Grande to the Pacific Coast.

Conflicts have also caused tensions among residents of a single country. The Seven Years' War (1756-1763) resulted in all French territory east of the Mississippi River being ceded to Britain. This dramatically shifted Canada's political geography, creating divisions between French Canadians and those of the British Commonwealth. This division still influences Canadian politics.

North American countries have also suffered through civil wars. The civil wars that occurred in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador between the 1970s and 1990s killed tens of thousands of civilians and pushed many others to immigrate to Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The region also became a hotspot for foreign policy and financial assistance. The United States, for instance, aimed to protect its economic and political interests by backing various military governments and guerrilla groups.

Contemporary Issues

Today, North America's political geography is deeply influenced by economic and demographic trends. Two important policies—the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, signed in 1994 and ended in 2020) and the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR, signed in 2004)—have affected trade between countries on the continent. Most significantly, the agreements have reduced or eliminated duties and tariffs. A duty is a kind of tax charged for items purchased outside the country. A tariff is another kind of tax, charged on imports and exports.

Both policies have eliminated duties on U.S. and Canadian agricultural exports, such as corn, wheat, and soybeans. The agreements have also reduced tariffs on goods like coffee, sugar, fruits, and vegetables. These are important exports for the rest of the continent.

While the agreements have eased trade between countries and regions of North America, they have also caused major political and economic problems. Corn imports to Mexico have impoverished many Mexican farmers, who cannot compete against the lower U.S. or Canadian prices.

NAFTA is also believed to have pushed many industries out of the United States and into the cheaper labor markets of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Companies find it less expensive to manufacture goods in these places for many reasons. Wages are lower and there are fewer health and safety regulations. Because there are often fewer restrictions on child labor and fewer opportunities for education, many companies find many

more workers. These cheaper labor markets reduce the strength of the U.S. manufacturing sector.

Immigration is perhaps the most sensitive aspect of North America's political geography. Most immigration is fueled by poverty. People from North America's low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), such as Haiti, frequently immigrate to the continent's high-income countries (HICs), such as the United States.

Immigration can be a long, difficult process. It involves more than just the physical migration from one nation to another. The governments of both countries must agree to the migration. Immigrants must often learn a new language and culture, including ways of dressing, eating, and socializing. Immigrants wishing to become citizens must also take classes to prove they are loyal to their new country. Often, immigrants must depend on luck: In the United States and Canada, lottery (randomized) systems often determine which immigrants can legally migrate.

As a result of these difficulties, many impoverished immigrants from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America have illegally settled in HICs. Illegal immigrants migrate for the same reasons legal immigrants do—to look for better economic and political opportunities.

Critics of illegal immigration say these immigrants are more likely to commit a crime and use public welfare programs, such as those that help pay for education and medical care. Critics say these immigrants do not contribute to society by paying taxes that fund these public programs.

Future Issues

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States and all of North America became more concerned with safety. National security at the international, regional, and domestic level will continue to be an important issue. Internationally, the HICs of North America, especially the United States, continue to negotiate their diplomatic presence in the world while claiming to protect themselves from terrorist attacks at home.

Drug trafficking has become more pronounced regionally, especially along the Panama-Colombia border and the U.S.-Mexico border. This trade has been linked to the extreme violence that currently afflicts northern Mexico, damaging political relations between Mexico and the United States.

One of the most important aspects of North America's political and financial future rests largely on its efforts to minimize the effects of climate change.

The regulation or reduction of carbon emissions is perhaps the most important part of reducing global warming and minimizing the effects of climate change. As part of the 2009 international agreement known as the Copenhagen Accord, some North American countries agreed to reduce emissions. The United States, one of the world's largest producers of emissions, agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. Costa Rica pledged to be entirely carbon neutral by 2021.

Website

National Geographic Environment: Expedition Blue Planet—North