ENCYCLOPEDIC ENTRY

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South America: Human Geography

South America's human landscape is deeply influenced by indigenous and immigrant populations, and their connection to the physical environment.

GRADES

6 - 12+

SUBJECTS

Arts and Music, Geography, Human Geography, Social Studies, World History



1/8

PHOTOGRAPH

Machu Picchu

Archaeologists divide the material they study into two major categories: features and artifacts. Features are materials that cannot be moved to study. Pyramids, mounds, and the remains of ancient cities, such as the Incan city of Machu Picchu, Peru, above, are features. Often referred to as "The Lost City of the Incas," Machu Picchu is one of the most familiar pre-Columbian features in the world.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID MIN, MYSHOT

ARTICLE VOCABULARY

Learning materials

MAPS

- Explore South America in National Geographic MapMaker

South America, the fourth-largest continent, extends from the Gulf of Darién in the northwest to the Tierra del Fuego archipelago in the south. Along with the islands of Tierra del Fuego, the continent includes the Galápagos Islands (Ecuador), Easter Island (Chile), the Falkland Islands (United Kingdom), and the Chiloé and Juan Fernández archipelagos (Chile)

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

Today, South America is home to the citizens of Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, the Falkland Islands, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay.

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

South America's human landscape is deeply influenced by indigenous populations and their connection to the physical environment. These deep relationships continue to flourish on the continent through celebration, religion and political action.

Cultural Geography

Historic Cultures

The historic cultures of South America developed in connection with distinct regional landscapes. The three principal regions of early development were the Pacific coast, suited to fishing and trading societies; the major rivers of the Amazon Basin, with abundant water, plant and animal resources; and the Andes, where mountains provided security.

The Incan Empire is the most well known indigenous culture of South America. The Inca Empire was established in 1438 in the Andean city of

Cuzco, Peru. Over a period of 100 years, the empire expanded to include parts of present-day Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina and Colombia.

In order to communicate throughout this vast region, the Inca built an expansive network of roads. This network was made up of two main north-south roads, one running along the Pacific coast and another through the Andes. Many east-west roads connected the two. The Inca built forts, inns, food storage facilities and signal towers along this impressive "foot highway." These sites, and the highways that connected them, facilitated the Inca's domination over most of the western part of the continent.

The importation of African slaves represented a major shift in the cultural landscape of South America. Most slaves were brought to Brazil. Their unique cultural practices were integrated with indigenous Indian beliefs as well as European rituals.

The religious practice of Candomblé, for example, is a uniquely Afro-Brazilian cultural tradition. Candomblé is a combination of traditional beliefs from the Yoruba, Fon, and Bantu cultures of Africa. Priests and other followers of these religions interacted with one another in large Brazilian slave communities. These faiths are polytheistic, meaning they honor many gods and goddesses. Slave owners and church leaders put slaves under intense pressure to convert to Catholicism, a monotheistic, or one-god, religion. Over time, the Candomblé faith incorporated parts of Christianity, such as saints and the display of crucifixes.

Other historic cultures of South America developed with the physical, as well as cultural, landscape. A distinct gaucho (or "cowboy") culture

developed in the Pampas, for instance. In the mid-18th century, gauchos hunted herds of wild horses and cattle that roamed freely on the extensive grasslands. They then sold their hides and tallow—waxy fat used in making candles and soap—at a high price to European traders.

Much like the North American cowboy, the gaucho was praised as free-spirited, strong and honest. A popular culture of songs, stories and films developed around the gaucho image. Gaucho culture still persists, especially in Argentina and Uruguay, where gaucho dress, song and food are used to evoke national pride.

Contemporary Cultures

South America's rich history is explored by contemporary cultures. Organizations are reaching a broader global audience in order to spread social and political messages, and bring in revenue from tourism and investment.

Indigenous societies continue to have a strong presence in South America. COICA, the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin, integrates nine organizations that represent each country of the Amazon region. COICA protects indigenous practices, focusing on sustainable use o resources. The group has worked on issues such as environmental legislation, cultural representation and leadership training for indigenous peoples.

Religious practices remain the backbone of many South American cultures. While Catholicism dominates the continent, other spiritual beliefs have influenced both spiritual and secular activities.

The Carnival of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a festival held every year about 40 days before Easter, is an important example of a religious celebration that has been adopted by secular culture. It is both an important event in the Catholic calendar and one of the largest revenue generators in Rio.

The Rio Carnival is the largest carnival event in the world, attracting millions of Brazilian and foreign tourists. During Carnival season, hotel prices are often four times higher than average. Some tourists pay hundreds of dollar to participate in the parade.

Most participants, however, are Brazilian. The Rio Carnival incorporates two important social groups—samba schools and blocos. Samba schools are large social groups, often with thousands of members, which create elaborate floats and costumes for the Carnival parade. Blocos are smaller groups that often gather in neighborhoods to dance during Carnival festivities.

Political Geography

Political geography is the internal and external relationships between governments and citizens. South America's history and development have been shaped by its political geography.

Historic Issues

The European colonization of South America defined the continent's early political geography. The Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 granted Spain and Portugal the exclusive right to colonize all lands outside of Europe. The treaty also established a line of demarcation, which gave all land west of the

line to Spain and all land east of the line to Portugal. Spain colonized the majority of South America and Portugal colonized present-day Brazil.

The dominance of the Spanish and Portuguese languages on the continent is a result of Catholic missionaries' educational work. They also developed writing systems for native oral traditions such as Quechua, Nahuatl, and Guarani.

Marriages between European colonizers and native populations established the mestizo class. Mestizos are people of mixed indigenous an European ancestry. Today, mestizos make up large parts of the populations of many South American countries, such as Paraguay (95%), Ecuador (65%) and Colombia (58%).

Mestizos were at the heart of South America's revolutionary movement. Inspired by the American and French Revolutions, mestizos fought in several wars of independence from 1806 to 1826. These wars and other regional conflicts established the relatively stable boundaries of South America's present-day countries. Among the revolutionary leaders were th Venezuelan Simón Bolívar and the Argentinean José de San Martín. Bolívar and San Martín remain among the most recognized and respected figures in South American history.

South America has also suffered violent political transitions, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. These decades were defined by the Cold War, a global struggle between democratic Western nations and repressive nations with communist economies.

The successful Cuban revolution of 1959 brought communism to Cuba. The United States and other western nations feared that communism would spread throughout Latin America, which includes Central and South America and parts of the Caribbean. Communist leaders did, in fact, gain some power in South America during the 1960s. Hoping to destroy the communist presence, U.S.-backed military dictatorships overthrew the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

These dictatorships detained tens of thousands of political prisoners. Many of them were tortured and killed. These nations' current democratic governments continue to investigate the atrocities that occurred during the dictatorship era.

Contemporary Issues

Today, South America's political geography can be defined by a desire to reduce foreign influence. The nationalization and privatization of industry, as well as the influence of indigenous groups, are the primary political issues affecting South America.

Nationalization is a type of ownership where the state controls an industry, as opposed to private companies. Some South American nations have nationalized industries, such as electricity or oil production, in order to encourage economic development.

Chile nationalized its copper mines in 1971, for instance. Before nationalization, Chilean copper mines were controlled by large foreign companies. Today, CODELCO, the National Copper Corporation of Chile, is the largest copper company in the world, with more than $16 billion worth

of sales in 2010.

The current trend of nationalization is largely associated with the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Chávez, who died in 2013, enacted a "Hydrocarbons Law" which took effect in 2002 and nationalized all oil production and distribution activities. Bolivian President Evo Morales has nationalized the oil and natural gas industry of Bolivia. Morales also bought water distribution rights in the capital of La Paz from a private French company. Other leaders, such as Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, have threatened to nationalize industries if foreign companies do not respect the rights of the countries they are doing business in.

Many believe that nationalization has improved the lives of local populations, and the poor strongly support nationalization efforts. Others argue that nationalization has worsened the quality of services and given too much control to the government. Chávez, for instance, remains one of South America's most well-known political figures, seen as both a popular leader and power-hungry dictator.

Some South American countries have done the opposite of nationalization—they have privatized industries. In these countries, such as Brazil and Argentina, the government has sold industries to mostly foreign investors and companies.

Much like nationalization, privatization has had mixed results. Many industries are now more efficient producers of resources such as steel. Services such as water and sewage are also more reliable under private ownership. However, privatization has contributed to higher

unemployment rates and increased the costs of goods and services.

Indigenous populations of South America have aimed to increase their local and global influence. In 2009, for instance, Bolivia passed an important new constitution. It guaranteed political representation of indigenous groups, recognizes their communal forms of property, and grants them the right to use indigenous justice systems. The Bolivian Education Ministry is expanding its native-language programs. President Morales, an Aymara Indian and the nation's first indigenous president, has been central to the increased representation of Bolivia's indigenous majority.

In 2006, two indigenous women, Hilaria Supa and María Sumire, became the first two people to be sworn into the Peruvian Congress using an indigenous language, Quechua. Their work to support the rights of indigenous people has led to the creation of many Quechua-language materials and media, including Quechua versions of the Google search pag and the Microsoft Windows software system.

Future Issues

Urbanization will define the human geography of South America in years to come. Latin America is the most urbanized of the world's developing regions. It is the only developing region with more poor people in cities than in rural areas. Individuals and families face increasing job insecurity, lower wages and a reduction in social services such as electricity and water.

Urbanization and industrialization are also destroying the unique biomes of South America. The Amazon rainforest is being burned at a rate of one acre every second. Trees are harvested for the timber industry, while the plains

of the rainforest are turned into ranches, farms and towns. This development is increasing the amount of air and water pollution in the Amazon basin and elsewhere.

South America's rural areas will suffer as more and more investment is made in the continent's cities. In rural areas, poor people face the consequences of geographic isolation and limited public investment in education, health care and housing. The continent's poorest communities are indigenous populations in remote mountain areas in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

Another important predictor of South America's political and financial future is 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, the most recent period of climate change. As part of the 2016 international agreement known simply as the Paris Climate Agreement or Paris Agreement, some South American countries agreed to reduce emissions. Brazil, a rising industrial power, agreed to reduce emissions by 37% by 2025. The oil-rich countries of Venezuela and Ecuador, however, have decided not to engage with the Paris Agreement.

In fact, Chávez and his supporters were some of the most vocal critics of international climate agreements like that reached in Paris. They argue that the agreement was drafted by a small group of powerful countries. They say developed countries such as the United States and those in the European Union already developed their industries and infrastructure in th

20th century, without concern for carbon emissions. Agreements that put limits on emissions from developing countries, they say, are unfair. These underdeveloped countries would face the challenges of development with greater responsibilities.

Articles & Profiles

- National Geographic Magazine: How Spain's Lust for Gold Doomed the Inca Empire
- National Geographic: Rain Forest Warriors: How Indigenous Tribes Protect the Amazon
- National Geographic Magazine: 7 Stunning Natural Wonders in South America

Website

- National Geographic: South America Travel Guide

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