

North America: Human geography

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A painting of (from left) Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri and two Pawnees. Native Americans were some of the first inhabitants of North America. After centuries of wars, colonization and immigration, the continent is now inhabited by a wide range of people and cultures. Image from the public domain

North America is the third-largest continent in the world. It extends from the Aleutian Islands in the northwest to Panama in the south.



North America and South America are named after Italian navigator Amerigo Vespucci. Vespucci was the first European who said the Americas were not part of the East Indies. He claimed it was an entirely separate continent. The East Indies were the area of eastern Asia that includes today's countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Today, North America is home to 23 countries and many territories. Canada, the United States, Greenland, Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama are all part of North America. So are the Caribbean islands.

Historic Cultures



The first North Americans likely migrated from Siberia, in northern Asia. They crossed a frozen land bridge over the Bering Strait and spread south to Florida, California, Mexico and Central America.

The Olmec and the Maya people lived in central Mexico and built the first cities on the continent. Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan boasted structures such as canals, apartment buildings and irrigation systems.

Many of these early North American cultures were very advanced. Mayan calendars recorded eclipses and the changing seasons. The Mayans used only three symbols to write very large numbers. These symbols were dots, lines and a football-shaped symbol that meant zero. The Mayans were, in fact, the first culture to have a written symbol for zero.

In the southern region of North America, people harvested corn, squash and beans. Not everyone had to work the land to survive. Some people built buildings while others became engineers, artists and political leaders. The Maya and Aztec were important civilizations in Mexico. The Iroquois were important Native American tribes in southeastern Canada and the northeastern U.S.



Further north, the Plains Indians followed the American bison as the animals searched for fresh grazing land. Plains Indians include the Lakota, Blackfoot and Nez Perce. These Native Americans ate bison meat and used hides and bones to create dwellings, tools and clothing. Plains Indian communities and bison depended on each other. When the bison became extinct, the power and influence of the Plains people became much weaker.

The environment also had a large effect on traditional beliefs. For example, the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights, are amazing displays of light. The Inuit of the Arctic thought these lights were their family and friends in the afterlife, as well as the souls of animals.

Contemporary Cultures

Modern North American societies are also greatly influenced by the continent's environment. North America's economy is based on natural resources, from minerals to coffee.

Tourism is also important, especially for the small Caribbean nations. The islands get about 20 million visitors every year, and in 2010, tourism brought in \$39 billion to their economies.

North American culture is shaped by migration. Immigrants have moved to the United States and Canada for hundreds of years. Immigrants and their children have become scientific, business and cultural leaders.

Often immigrants would all settle in the same neighborhoods. The neighborhoods would take on the cultural flavor of the migrants. In Miami, Florida, there is the Cuban "Little Havana." In Minneapolis, Minnesota, there is the Somali "Little Mogadishu." In Toronto, Canada, there is the Korean neighborhood called "Koreatown."

Many immigrants are also refugees who flee civil war, violence or earthquakes.

Historic Issues

Many Europeans came to North America after Italian explorer Christopher Columbus arrived in the Caribbean in 1492. They sought to claim and colonize North American land. Colonists in the United States pushed native populations to the west. Millions of Native Americans were killed by disease, war and hardship.

Many North American countries have seen both peace and conflict. For example, the U.S. and Canada have the longest peaceful border in the world. However, most of North America's history is dotted with violence. Less than 200 years ago, the U.S. gained 500,000 square miles of Mexican territory, including Texas and New Mexico, during the Mexican-American War.

Earlier, in the mid-1700s, Britain and France fought the Seven Years War. Britain gained French territory east of the Mississippi River, creating problems between French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians that last to this day.



Civil wars have also marked North America. From the 1970s to the 1990s, civil war broke out in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed, while many others were had no choice but to leave.

Contemporary Issues

Today, two important trade agreements have had a big effect on political geography. The first agreement is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was signed in 1994. The second is the 2004 Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement. Both reduced or cut out taxes on goods like grain and manufactured products. In other words, merchants can buy and sell goods to other countries without paying extra taxes.

These agreements have also caused major political and economic problems. For example, many Mexican corn farmers have lost their farms. They cannot compete against the U.S. or Canadian corn, which is much cheaper. Also, many U.S. companies moved factories to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, where wages are lower and there are fewer health and safety rules.



Immigration is also a very difficult problem. Most immigration is fueled by poverty, as people from poor nations, such as Haiti, often immigrate to richer countries, such as the United States. Many immigrants from Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America have illegally settled in developed countries. They migrate for the same reasons that legal immigrants do. They are looking for better opportunities for themselves and their children.

Future Issues

On September 11, 2001, terror attacks killed almost 3,000 people in the United States. This event made North America more concerned with safety.

Another important problem is climate change. Climate change is caused by burning fossil fuels, like oil and coal. Both the U.S. and Costa Rica promised to reduce how much fuel they burn in a 2009 agreement called the Copenhagen Accord.

Quiz

1 Read the section "Historic Cultures."

What does this section show that other sections do not?

- (A) that North American cultures were advanced before the arrival of European immigrants
- (B) that early North American cultures were fairly primitive, nomadic societies
- (C) that cultures in southern North America were trading with Native American tribes further north
- (D) that European influence in North America went back far before the arrival of Christopher Columbus

2 Read the paragraph from the section "Contemporary Issues."

These agreements have also caused major political and economic problems. For example, many Mexican corn farmers have lost their farms. They cannot compete against the U.S. or Canadian corn, which is much cheaper. Also, many U.S. companies moved factories to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, where wages are lower and there are fewer health and safety rules.

How does this paragraph contribute to the entire article?

- (A) by showing the events that led up to the passage of the two most important trade agreements in North America
- (B) by suggesting that the benefits of close relations between North American nations outweigh the potential drawbacks
- (C) by demonstrating that increased trade can have unintended negative consequences for North American nations
- (D) by explaining how the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement differ

- 3 Which selection from the article is BEST illustrated by the second image in the section "Historic Cultures."
- (A) The Olmec and the Mayan people lived in central Mexico and built the first cities on the continent. Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan boasted structures such as canals, apartment buildings and irrigation systems.
 - (B) The Maya and Aztec were important civilizations in Mexico. The Iroquois were important Native American tribes in southeastern Canada and the northeastern U.S.
 - (C) These Native Americans ate bison meat and used hides and bones to create dwellings, tools and clothing. Plains Indian communities and bison depended on each other.
 - (D) For example, the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights, are amazing displays of light. The Inuit of the Arctic thought these lights were their family and friends in the afterlife, as well as the souls of animals.
- 4 How do the image and text in the section "Contemporary Issues" develop a coherent understanding of immigration in North America?
- (A) They explain that immigration has many causes and can be both legal and illegal.
 - (B) They suggest that immigration is usually caused by conflict in the country people are leaving.
 - (C) They argue that illegal immigration is a major problem for some countries in North America.
 - (D) They show that trade agreements have caused much of the immigration in North America.