

Summary: Physical Geography

Defining Latin America

Latin America includes Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean Islands, and South America.

Mexico is the farthest north of the Latin American countries. Volcanoes and earthquakes cause problems for Mexico and many other Latin American nations. These volcanoes and earthquakes are caused by the shifting of five tectonic plates beneath Latin America. Air pollution is a big problem in Mexico. The mountains surrounding the city to the east, south, and west trap exhaust from cars and other pollutants.

Central America is a landmass that forms a bridge between Mexico and South America. About 80 percent of Central America is hilly or mountainous. Like Mexico, Central America has many volcanoes and earthquakes as well.

The Caribbean Islands are east of Central America. Some of the islands are the peaks of volcanic mountains. Others began as coral reefs, growing over volcanic islands below them.

The continent of South America is linked to North America by the Isthmus of Panama. The Andes Mountain range stretches along the west coast of South America. It is the longest mountain range on Earth. The Amazon River carries the most water in the world. It has more than 1,000 tributaries. Deforestation of the Amazon rain forest has led to an increase in the amount of carbon dioxide in the air.

Climate

Most of Latin America lies in the Tropical Zone, where temperatures are high. The waters of the Caribbean stay warm most of the year and heat the air over them. This creates warm winds that keep the Caribbean Islands warm even in winter. At times, a warm ocean current known as *El Niño* flows eastward toward North and South America. *El Niño* can bring heavy rain and flooding.

Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

tributary *noun*, a river or stream that flows into a larger body of water

deforestation *noun*, the process of cutting and clearing away trees from a forest

Tropical Zone *noun*, the area between the latitudes 23°27' north and 23°27' south, where the climate is typically hot

El Niño *noun*, a warm ocean current linked to unusually high air pressure in the South Pacific and known for bringing heavy rains to Latin America

After You Read

REVIEW How do Mexico's mountains affect life there?

Circle the sentences that tell how Mexico's mountains affect life there.

REVIEW What causes so many volcanoes and earthquakes in this region?

Underline the sentence that explains what causes volcanoes and earthquakes.

REVIEW What effect does *El Niño* have on weather in Latin America?

Draw a box around the sentences that explain how *El Niño* affects the weather.