

Lesson 1 The Geography of the Americas

MAIN IDEAS

Geography The physical geographies of North and South America are very different.

Geography The Andes provide a harsh environment for the people who live there.

Geography Meso-America has a variety of landforms and climates.

Physical Geography of the Americas

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What is the physical geography of the Americas like?

North and South America

- North and South America are connected by **isthmus**—narrow land bridge

Major Landforms and Rivers

- Mountains along western parts of both continents
 - Rocky Mountains in North America, Andes in South America
- Water flows down ranges into major river systems
 - Mississippi River in North America
 - Amazon and Paraná rivers in South America

A Variety of Climates

- North America is north of equator; South America mostly south of it
 - seasons are reversed
- Much of North America has mild, dry climate and four seasons
 - most people live in mild areas; few live in cold northern Canada
- Half of South America is **tropical**—warm and rainy
 - tropical areas in North America mostly lie in Central America

REVIEW QUESTION

What are some major differences between the geographies and climates of North America and South America?

Geography of the Andes

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What geographic features are characteristic of the Andes?

Tall Peaks

- In South America, Andes extend 5,500 miles, from Venezuela to Chile
 - peaks of Andes are highest in Americas, almost four miles high
 - thin, stony soil at highest elevations; richer soil at lower elevations
 - plate movement causes volcanic activity, earthquakes
 - severe climate includes freezing, unpredictable rains

High Plateaus

- Group of high plateaus lie between two ranges of Andes
 - filled with hills, valleys, plains, deserts, a few large rivers
 - little rain in high desert regions
- Geography makes farming difficult
 - ancient Andean civilizations developed irrigation canals
 - developed crops, such as potatoes, that would grow there

REVIEW QUESTION

What makes the Andes a harsh environment?

Geography of Meso-America

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How do the geography and climate of Meso-America contrast with those of the Andes?

Land of Ancient Civilizations

- Ancient civilizations rose in **Meso-America**—a North American region
 - includes southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize
 - also parts of Honduras, Nicaragua

The Land of Meso-America

- Tropical lowlands—dense jungle areas—along coast of Gulf of Mexico
 - also on **Yucatán Peninsula** between Gulf and Pacific
- Highlands between Sierra Madre mountains have earthquakes, volcanoes

Climate

- Lowlands get over 100 inches of rain each year
 - good for palm, avocado, cacao trees
- Early Meso-American farmers irrigated dry highlands
 - grew corn, beans, squash
- In lowlands, used **slash-and-burn agriculture**—cut back, burned jungle
 - when field became less productive, farmers cleared new land

REVIEW QUESTION

How does climate affect the two main regions in Meso-America?

Lesson Summary

- North America and South America have contrasting climates and geographies.
- The Andes Mountains provided a challenging environment for ancient civilizations.
- The climates of Meso-America resulted in the development of different agricultural practices.

Why It Matters Now . . .

Today the potatoes developed in the Andes and the corn developed in Meso-America have become important crops in countries all over the world.