



Central America and the Caribbean

Natural Environments

Chapter 11 Section One



Landforms in Central America

- ⇒ Central America is an isthmus that links North and South America
- ⇒ The Pacific Ocean is to the West and the Caribbean Sea is to the East.
- ⇒ Central America has seven countries;
 - Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama
- ⇒ Narrow coastal plains are found in much of Central America
- ⇒ Rugged hills or mountains are common in the interior regions
- ⇒ Central America has few long rivers.



Landforms in the Caribbean

- ➔ The islands of the Caribbean called the West Indies form an arc from just south of Florida to Venezuela
- ➔ The major island groups of the West Indies are the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles
- ➔ The Greater Antilles include Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica and Puerto Rico
- ➔ Hispaniola is divided between two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic
- ➔ The Lesser Antilles include more than 20 small island countries and territories
- ➔ Northeast of Cuba in the Atlantic Ocean are the 700 islands that make up the Bahamas

Tectonic Activity in the Region

- ➔ Central America, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico all lie on the Caribbean Plate.
- ➔ West of Central America is the Cocos Plate which dives beneath the Caribbean Plate
- ➔ This tectonic action has created mountains throughout most of Central America
- ➔ Mountains have also formed along the eastern edge of the Caribbean Plate where it meets the North and South American plates.
- ➔ The tops of these mountains are the islands of the Lesser Antilles (pg. 64 in book)
- ➔ Some of the mountains along these plate boundaries are active volcanoes ie...Martinique
- ➔ Some islands have mountains that are centuries old rock ie...Hispaniola



Coral Reefs form islands

- ⇒ Some islands in the Caribbean began as coral reefs.
- ⇒ The reefs were gradually uplifted by the collision of tectonic plates and over time became flat limestone islands ie...
Cayman Islands



Climate, Plant Life:

- ➔ Central America and the Caribbean Islands extend across the warm, sunny tropical latitudes
- ➔ Tropical wet and dry climates are typical
- ➔ Temperatures seldom vary more than ten degrees from summer to winter
- ➔ During winter high pressure generally brings dry weather
- ➔ A summer rainy season is caused by low pressure cells that move north across the region bringing rain almost every afternoon




Physical Features and Climate

- ➔ The physical features of the region can affect the climate dramatically
- ➔ In Central America the Caribbean coast is effected by warm moist trade winds causing a tropical wet climate with lots of rain even in winter
- ➔ The mountainous interior of Central America has a cooler highland climate
- ➔ The eastern side of the mountains get heavy rain as moist air rises and cools
- ➔ The slopes of the mountains and the mountain valleys in the west on the Pacific Coast often lie in the rain shadow and have drier climates



Vegetation in Central America

- ➔ On the Caribbean Coast the tropical humid climate allows dense rain forests to thrive.
- ➔ On the Pacific Coast where the climate is drier scattered trees, shrubs and tropical grasslands are found
- ➔ Much of the natural vegetation has been cleared for plantations and ranching
- ➔ Where the land has been cleared for farming heavy rains during hurricane season often leads to severe erosion and mud slides
- ➔ Thickets of mangrove trees dominate the tropical muddy coastlines of Central America
- ➔ Mangroves are unusual because their roots grow in salt water
- ➔ Abundant marine life lives among the roots of the mangrove forest.



Climate and Vegetation in the Caribbean

- ⇒ Throughout the Caribbean elevation greatly affects climate
- ⇒ Islands with volcanoes and mountains often have heavy rain on the windward side and rainshadow climates on the leeward side of the island.
- ⇒ Lower, flatter islands do not have orographic effect but the rain that does fall sinks quickly into limestone bedrock.
- ⇒ The low islands have limited water resources.

Natural Resources and Environmental

Hazards of the Region

- ➔ One of the regions greatest natural resources is its warm and sunny climate
- ➔ The climate attracts millions of tourists from the U.S., Canada and Europe
- ➔ Fertile soil and rich fishing grounds are also natural resources
- ➔ Mineral resources include gold, bauxite, nickel and oil
- ➔ Environmental hazards include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and hurricanes
- ➔ In 2001 two separate earthquakes that occurred just a month apart killed hundreds of people in El Salvador
- ➔ Hurricanes occur mostly in late summer