

Latin America Geography and Culture Study Guide

Latin America includes Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Islands of the Caribbean, also known as the West Indies (since Columbus thought he had found Asia, including India). The region is called Latin America because much of it is Spanish-or Portuguese-speaking, and these are known as Latin or **Romance** languages because they derive from the Latin spoken in the ancient Roman Empire.

Rainforest Deforestation

Importance of Rainforests:

Rainforests are incredibly important to the health of our planet. Rainforests:

- help stabilize the world's climate;
- provide a home to many plants and animals;
- maintain the water cycle
- protect against flood, drought, and erosion;
- are a source for medicines and foods;
- home for traditional inhabitants

Rainforests help stabilize the world's climate by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Scientists have shown that excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere from human activities is contributing to climate change. Therefore, living rainforests have an important role in mitigating climate change, but when rainforests are chopped down and burned, the carbon stored in their wood and leaves is released into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change.

The role of rainforests in the water cycle is to add water to the atmosphere through the process of transpiration (in which plants release water from their leaves during photosynthesis). This moisture contributes to the formation of rain clouds, which release the water back onto the rainforest. In the Amazon, 50-80 percent of moisture remains in the ecosystem's water cycle. When forests are cut down, less moisture goes into the atmosphere and rainfall declines, sometimes leading to drought.

Moisture generated by rainforests travels around the world. Scientists have discovered that rainfall in America's Midwest is affected by forests in the Congo. Meanwhile, moisture created in the Amazon ends up falling as rain as far away as Texas, and forests in Southeast Asia influence rain patterns in southeastern Europe and China. Distant rainforests are therefore important to farmers everywhere.

Rainforests are home to a large number of the world's plant and animal species, including many endangered species. As forests are cut down, many species are doomed to extinction, including those which could have provided valuable human medicines. When rainforests disappear, the indigenous people who live there also lose their unique ways of life.

Rainforest Destruction

On average, six acres of pastureland in the tropics are needed to feed just one cow. Clearing new land for pasture for cattle ranching and subsistence farmland are the greatest causes of Amazon rainforest destruction. On average, six acres of pastureland in the tropics are needed to feed just one cow. In slash-and-burn agriculture, the form of subsistence farming found in rainforests, farmers cutting down rainforest vegetation, burn it, and plant crops to feed their families. Because most of a rainforest's nutrients are found in its living vegetation, the soils that support so much biodiversity are actually quite thin and poor. The farmers can grow crops in the ashes of burned forests for a few years, but eventually, the nutrient-poor soils give out, and the people must move farther into the forest and start over.

People who need wood for fuel also cause deforestation. When timber companies cut down valuable hardwoods in a forest in an irresponsible way, the process usually destroys all surrounding vegetation and

jeopardizes the wildlife that depended on that lost vegetation. Illegal logging is also a problem, as is commercial soybean farming. Development projects like dams, new settlements, highways and large-scale mining are also leading causes of deforestation.

Air Pollution in Mexico City

Geography conspires with human activity in Mexico City to produce a poisonous scenario. The daily activities of the crowded city, their millions of vehicles, many of which are older, combine with a vast local industry and the city's unique geographical location all make air pollution a serious threat to human health.

Mexico City sits in a basin more than 7,400 feet above sea level, surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges. The only significant opening lies to the north. The surrounding mountains tend to isolate the city from the winds of regional weather patterns. The city's height above sea level means there's less oxygen in the air at this altitude. As a result, most of the air pollution is the result of incomplete burning of fossil fuels, mainly vehicle emissions. Since the fuels aren't burnt properly at this altitude, this leads to the formation of high amounts pollution particles called soot. Because of the surrounding mountains, winds don't blow the pollution away from the city. Instead, the pollution is trapped there, where it causes respiratory (breathing) illnesses, eye irritation, and possibly even heart damage.

Venezuelan Oil Pollution

Prolonged oil production in Venezuela has taken its toll on the country's environment. There is significant oil pollution from spills along the Caribbean coast, which harm the ability of fishermen to earn a living. Because of the oil industry, Venezuela is also the region's top emitter of carbon dioxide. In addition to the spills killing aquatic animals and birds, and causing human breathing illnesses, a side-effect of the Venezuelan oil business can be seen at Lake Maracaibo in north-western Venezuela. The eastern shore of South America's largest lake is sinking. This commonly occurs when petroleum is extracted in large quantities, as it has been for decades in oil fields of the Maracaibo basin. This has already caused severe flooding in towns and cities in the area.

Nations Comparison

Latin American Nations by Population Rank

1 Brazil 2 Mexico 6 Venezuela 10 Cuba

	Mexico – population 112,322,757 area, square miles – 116,100,000	Venezuela – population 29,059,000 area, square miles – 29,700,000
Location/Ease of Trade	Long border w/US means much trade, Atlantic and Pacific coasts	Atlantic access, and Panama Canal provides Pacific access
Climate and Where People Live	Dry climate in the north and sparsely populated there except for along the west coast; people live in the higher, cooler central plateau and south, and in some cities along the US border. Over 75% of people live in urban areas. Located ½ in Tropics, ½ sub-tropical.	The highest concentrations of people live in higher, cooler elevations of the north, in the northwest around Lake Maracaibo, and near oil fields; people also live, though less heavily so, in the Llanos plain of the Orinoco river; Venezuela is sparsely populated in the south and southeast where rainforest is found. Almost 90% of people live in urban areas. Located completely in Tropics.
Natural Resources and Trade	Oil, manufacturing, agricultural products, minerals	Oil is major industry

	Brazil – population 190,732,694 area, square miles – 194,300,000	Cuba – population 11,239,245 area, square miles – 11,200,000
Location/Ease of Trade	Atlantic access, though Pacific access is farther	Atlantic access, and Panama Canal provides Pacific access
Climate and Where People Live	People live in the higher, cooler land of the east and southeast; more sparsely populated in the Amazon Basin. Almost 85% of people live in urban areas. All but southernmost region is located in the Tropic, and it is sub-tropical.	People live in high population density throughout the island. Located completely in Tropics, but sea breezes make the climate pleasant. Over 75% of people live in urban areas.
Natural Resources and What is Traded	Agricultural products including beef, oil, minerals, manufacturing	Agricultural products

Latin American Culture

The cultures of Latin America are diverse. Each region has its own character, which reflects its history. The languages, customs, beliefs, and even the foods from an area are a result of this history. Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans have all contributed to the diversity of Latin America. Members of these groups often intermarried and consequently, different cultures developed over time, many showing a blend of influences.

On the Caribbean islands, a majority of the natives were forced to work on plantations and in the mines. Disease and death followed, and most of the natives on the islands were wiped out, their cultures lost. However, in Central and South America, many of the indigenous cultures were able to survive by moving to remote mountain or forest regions. Today, indigenous groups form the majority of the population in a number of Central American nations and a few South American ones.

Mestizos make up a large part of the populations of Mexico, mainland Central America, and some South American countries. Their ancestors were a blend of Europeans and indigenous Native Americans. People of African descent whose ancestors were brought over as slaves to work in the European owned mines and plantations during colonial times are also numerous in Latin America, particularly on the islands of the Caribbean, and of course there are Latin American of both African and native or European ancestry, as well. In some Latin American nations, people of European descent form the majority of the population.

As a result of the early exploration and colonization by the nation of Spain, most, but not all, Latin Americans nations are Spanish-speaking. Portugal, limited to colonizing the eastern region of South America by the Treaty of Tordesillas, is a major exception in that it is a Portuguese-speaking nation. As both Spain and Portugal were strongly Roman Catholic and brought missionaries with them to their colonies, people of most Latin American nations are also majority Roman Catholic, though these beliefs are frequently blended with indigenous or African influences, and some groups retain their indigenous beliefs entirely.