

South America: Human geography

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Kids pick teams before playing a pickup soccer game at Botafogo beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, May 31, 2014. Photo: AP Photo/Felipe Dana

South America is the world's fourth largest continent. South America is the landmass south of Panama.

South America and North America are named after Amerigo Vespucci. He was an Italian navigator who sailed with Christopher Columbus. He was the first European to say that the Americas were not part of the East Indies. He said they were separate from any known continent.

Today, South America is divided into many countries. They include Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay.

The continent also includes several islands: the Galapagos Islands are part of Ecuador and Easter Island is part of Chile. The Falkland Islands are part of the United Kingdom, but Argentina also claims these islands.

Many indigenous peoples live in South America. They are descendants of those who lived in South America before European explorers and settlers arrived.

The first humans in South America probably arrived from Asia. They crossed the Bering



Land Bridge into North America. Then, they migrated south. Another possibility is that they came to South America in a boat. They might have come across the Pacific from Polynesia.

Today, at least 22 million people in South America belong to an indigenous group. They speak several hundred languages. In Brazil alone, for instance, at least 135 languages are spoken.

Cultural Geography: Historic Cultures

The cultures of South America developed in three main regions. They are the Pacific coast, the Amazon basin, and the Andes mountains.

The Inca Empire is the best known native culture of South America. The Inca Empire began in 1438 in the Andean city of Cuzco, Peru.

To connect its empire, the Incas built a huge network of roads. It was made up of two main north-south roads. One ran along the Pacific coast and another through the Andes.

Spain and Portugal colonized South America. The European conquerors brought slaves from Africa. South America became a mix of African, native and European cultures.

Slave owners and church leaders pressured slaves to become Catholic. Over time, they included parts of Christianity in their own religions, like crosses and saints.

Different parts of the continent developed their own cultures. A gaucho, or "cowboy," culture developed in the Pampas, for instance. This is a region of grasslands in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. Like the North American cowboy, the gaucho was praised as independent, strong and honest.

Contemporary Cultures



Indigenous communities continue to have a strong effect on South America.

Religion remains very important in many South African countries. The Catholic Church is the strongest influence.

The Carnival of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is a Christian festival held every



about 40 days before Easter. It is also a huge party and attracts millions of Brazilian and foreign tourists.

Political Geography

Political geography is the relationship between governments and citizens.

The Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 gave Spain and Portugal the right to colonize all lands outside of Europe. Spain established colonies in most of South America. Portugal colonized present-day Brazil.

Catholic missionaries came from Europe. They wanted to convert people. The missionaries also developed writing systems for indigenous languages such as Quechua, Nahuatl and Guarani. Marriages between European colonizers and native populations established the mestizo class. Mestizos are people of mixed indigenous and European ancestry.

In 1959, Cuban communists overthrew their government. Communism is a political system. The government owns all property, and people have few freedoms. The United States and other Western nations worried that communism would spread throughout Latin America. The U.S. wanted to get rid of communist leaders. It helped defeat the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

Dictatorships replaced the communist governments. They arrested tens of its citizens, and and killed many of them. The United States helped these dictators.

Contemporary Issues

Other countries have had a huge impact on South America. Today, the continent is trying to reduce their influence.

Nationalization is a type of ownership where the state controls an industry. Some South American nations have nationalized industries, like electricity or oil.

Many believe that



nationalization has improved the lives of local people. The poor support it. Others argue that nationalization has made services worse. Opponents say it gives too much power to the government.

Some South American countries have privatized industries. This is the opposite of nationalization. In countries, like Brazil and Argentina, the government has sold industries to private companies. On one hand, many of them now produce more goods. However, more people are unemployed and prices have increased.

Future Issues

In general, the countries in South America are considered to be part of the developing world. These are countries with lower levels of income, health care and education than "developed" countries like the United States or Japan. They also tend to have a smaller middle class. There is no single definition of what makes a country a "developed" or "developing" country, though.



As a result, some people might say that the wealthier countries in South America like Argentina and Chile are developed countries, while others might not.

Many developing countries are facing very fast urbanization. This means that many people are moving from rural areas to cities. In South America this is especially true. In fact, it is one of the few regions where more poor people live in cities than rural areas.

Cities are getting very crowded. Housing, crime and transportation problems are just a few of the challenges cities face. Many cities in South America have huge slums. These are extremely crowded areas where people tend to live in extreme poverty. Living conditions in slums are often unsafe. Homes may not be very sturdy and services like electricity, water and sewage may not be reliable.

Urbanization and factories are hurting the environment in South America. The Amazon rainforest is being burned at a rate of one acre every second. Trees are harvested for the timber industry. Rainforests are turned into ranches, farms and towns. This is increasing the amount of air and water pollution.

In rural areas, little money is spent on education, health care, and housing. Some of the poorest people in South America are indigenous groups in rural areas.

Another important factor is climate change.

The earth is warming up. The way to reduce global warming is to stop burning fossil fuels. These are natural fuels, like oil and gas. Many power plants, for instance, burn a tremendous amount of coal to make electricity. Brazil promised to cut back on burning fossil fuels by 2025.



Quiz

1 Read the section titled "Political Geography."

Which paragraph explains WHY other European countries did NOT create colonies in South America?

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

Urbanization and factories are hurting the environment in South America. The Amazon rainforest is being burned at a rate of one acre every second. Trees are harvested for the timber industry. Rainforests are turned into ranches, farms and towns. This is increasing the amount of air and water pollution.

Which sentence from this paragraph BEST supports the idea that urbanization can be harmful to people?

- (A) The Amazon rainforest is being burned at a rate of one acre every second.
- (B) Trees are harvested for the timber industry.
- (C) Rainforests are turned into ranches, farms and towns.
- (D) This is increasing the amount of air and water pollution.

3 The word "indigenous" is essential to understanding the South American culture.

Which sentence from the article BEST explains what "indigenous" means?

- (A) They are descendants of those who lived in South America before European explorers and settlers arrived.
- (B) They crossed the Bering Land Bridge into North America.
- (C) Today, at least 22 million people in South America belong to an indigenous group.
- (D) Some of the poorest people in South America are indigenous groups in rural areas.

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

Nationalization is a type of ownership where the state controls an industry. Some South American nations have nationalized industries, like electricity or oil.

Which phrase from this paragraph helps you understand what "industry" means?

- (A) type of ownership
- (B) where the state controls
- (C) South American nations
- (D) like electricity or oil