

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# LATIN AMERICA TEACHER NOTES

## GEOGRAPHY

### physical features

Latin America, as a geographic region, extends from Mexico, south through the Central American land bridge, to the southernmost tip of the South American continent, and east across the Caribbean Sea. The region is bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Other major bodies of water bounding Latin America include: the Gulf of Mexico, off the eastern coast of Mexico; and the Caribbean Sea, located east of Central America and north of South America.

In North America, the Sierra Madres refer to a series of mountain ranges extending along the eastern, western, and southern sides of Mexico. Collectively this mountain system covers over 1,700 miles of terrain.

Cutting across the southern portion of the Central American land bridge – which is, in fact, actually part of the North American continent – is the Panama Canal. Constructed in 1914 across the Isthmus of Panama, this manmade waterway allows for the passage of vessels between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

In South America, the Andes Mountains extend down the western side of the entire continent for nearly 4,500 miles.

Also located in South America, on its western central coast, is the Atacama Desert. This desert, located primarily in Chile, is over 600 square miles in size and is the driest place on Earth.

Flowing across the north central part of the continent is the Amazon River. Located primarily in Brazil, the nearly 4,000-mile long Amazon is the world's second longest river after the Nile (which is located in eastern Africa.)



## political features

- NAFTA – North American Free Trade Agreement
- narcotics – Any controlled, non-medicinal substance (especially drugs)



Latin America, as a cultural region, is composed of twenty countries and six territories.

In North America, students will locate Mexico, the United States' southern neighbor and **NAFTA** trading partner. There are more Spanish-speakers in Mexico today than in Spain itself.

In Central America, students will locate Panama, famed for its canal of the same name.

In the Caribbean, students will locate Cuba, which has in recent years attempted to normalize diplomatic and commercial relations with the U.S. The nation remains the only communist state in the western hemisphere.

And in South America, students will locate Brazil, Chile, and Colombia. Brazil has the continent's largest total land area, economy, and population. Chile is an Andean nation with perhaps the strongest history of democracy in South America. Colombia, meanwhile, is arguably the most troubled nation on the continent, particularly as relates to the illegal **narcotics** trade.

## environmental issues - Mexico City

- smog – An atmospheric phenomenon whereby vehicle exhaust and factory smoke combine with fog

Mexico City, the capital of Mexico, has some of the worst air pollution of any major city on Earth. The issue stems from the city's low elevation coupled with the energy and transportation requirements of its nearly 9 million residents.

Located on the site of the former Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, Mexico City is one of the nation's largest industrial regions. More than 50,000 industries operate in or around this area. A substantial number of Mexicans have emigrated to Mexico City as a result.

Between the factory and coal power plant emissions and vehicle exhaust, Mexico City's air quality is extremely poor. Air quality flags are flown daily to designate the **smog** levels, particularly in the dry winter months.

In an effort to combat its air pollution, Mexico City limits the number of days its citizens are permitted to operate their personal motor vehicles. Mass transit systems, such as the city's bus and train networks, are encouraged as an alternative means of transportation.



## Environmental Issues - Amazon Rainforest

- deforestation – The destruction of a forested area, typically as a result of human activities.
- lumber – Wood that has been cut into planks for commercial construction use.



Brazil's Amazon rainforest, with an area of over 2 million square miles, is the world's largest intact forest. It is home to over 24 million Brazilians and contains 10% of the world's known plant and animal species. Rainforests, like the Amazon, act as atmospheric scrubbers for the planet – taking in carbon dioxide and converting it back into breathable, clean air.

Unfortunately the Amazon rainforest is being **deforested** at an alarming rate. The need for farmland and living space to support Brazil's ever-expanding population (currently estimated at just over 200 million), as well as the demand for cheap **lumber**, has contributed to a loss of more than 20% of the nation's rainforest. Although Brazil's government has passed numerous laws restricting logging, little funding has been allocated to actually enforce those laws.

## Location, Climate, Natural Resources, + Population

- arable – suitable for farming
- climate – the average annual weather conditions in a given location.
- commodities - any raw material or agricultural product that is bought and sold
- temperate – climate characterized by mild temperatures
- urban – an industrialized area of a city or town

Mexico is located in North America. It is bordered to the north by the United States and to the south by Belize and Guatemala. The Pacific Ocean is found on Mexico's western coast; the Caribbean Sea is on its eastern coast. The **climate** of Mexico varies by location. Coastal Mexico is hot and humid, while the interior is largely dry and **temperate**. Most of Mexico's population resides in the interior of the country where **arable** farmland is prevalent. More than 23% of Mexicans work in agriculture; however, agriculture only accounts for around 5% of Mexico's overall GDP. Millions of Mexicans have migrated to the nation's capital, Mexico City, seeking employment in the industrial sector. Mexico has vast deposits of petroleum, so its oil refining and automotive industries are major employers.

Brazil is located in northeastern South America and is the largest country on the continent. It is bordered by Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guyana to the north, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina to the west, and Uruguay to the south. The Caribbean Sea is found on Brazil's northern coast; the Atlantic Ocean is on its eastern coast. Brazil's climate is mostly tropical in the north of the country, although there are temperate zones south of the Tropic of Capricorn. Even though only 7% of Brazil's land is arable, it leads the world in coffee production. Oranges, papayas, sugarcane, and soybeans are also important agricultural **commodities**, as is timber (albeit at the expense of the Amazon rainforest.) Most of Brazil's population is found in the eastern coastal region of the country on account of the nation's vibrant tourism industry.

Cuba is an island located in the northwestern Caribbean, only about 90 miles south of Key West, Florida. The climate of Cuba is subtropical, making it a frequent target of hurricanes and tropical storms. The island's major natural resources include coffee, sugar, tobacco, and fish. Most Cubans live in the nation's urban areas where manufacturing jobs are present – especially sugar cane refining.