

## The Tropical North

### Lesson 1: Physical Geography of the Region

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

*How does geography influence the way people live?*

#### Terms to Know

- elevation** the measurement of how much above or below sea level a place is
- trade winds** steady winds that blow from higher latitudes toward the Equator
- cash crop** a farm product grown for export

### Where in the World: The Tropical North



## The Tropical North

### Lesson 1: Physical Geography of the Region, *continued*

#### Landforms and Waterways

**Guiding Question** *What are the major physical features of the Tropical North?*

South America's Tropical North consists of five countries: Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. The first three have the region's most diverse physical geography. The Andes mountain ranges run through each of them. Some peaks have **elevations** more than 18,000 feet (5,486 m). Elevation is the height above sea level. Cotopaxi in Ecuador is the world's highest active volcano. The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia are the world's highest coastal range.

Colombia has coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Its mountains make travel between the coasts difficult. So does the Darién, a wilderness region of deep ravines, swamps, and dense rain forest.

West of the Andes, Colombia and Ecuador have narrow coastal lowlands. East of the mountains, more lowlands extend into Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela. The southern half is part of the Amazon Basin. The northern half is a grassy plain called the Llanos. This plain also covers most of northern Venezuela.

The Guiana Highlands are a heavily forested region of hills, low mountains, and plateaus. They stretch from Southern Venezuela east into Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. Rain forest covers most of this region. There is a narrow band of low and sometimes swampy plains along the Atlantic coast.

The Orinoco River in Venezuela is the continent's third-longest river. Colombia's two main rivers are the Magdalena and the Cauca. They are important routes into the country's agricultural and industrial interior. Commercial ships can navigate most of the length of these rivers. The Guayas River has made Guayaquil Ecuador's largest city and a major seaport.

The Galápagos Islands lie 600 miles (966 km) west of Ecuador. These islands belong to Ecuador. They are home to many unusual animals because the island is so isolated. Today they are protected.

#### Climates

**Guiding Question** *How and why do climates vary in the Tropical North?*

South America's Tropical North lies along the Equator. There are a variety of climates due to differences in elevation or location. Others are caused by ocean currents or winds.

#### Defining

1. What is the definition of *elevation*?

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#### Explaining

2. Why is travel between Colombia's two coasts difficult?

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#### Marking the Text

3. Read the text on the left. Highlight the names of the countries where the Guiana Highlands are located.

#### Reading Progress Check

4. How do Colombia's rivers help the nation's economy?

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## The Tropical North

### Lesson 1: Physical Geography of the Region, *continued*



#### Marking the Text

5. Read the text on the right. Underline the sentences that describe the climate of the Chocó region of Colombia.



#### Reading Progress Check

6. How do the climates of the Pacific coast, the Atlantic coast, and the Caribbean coast differ?

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#### Drawing Conclusions

7. Why do you think the two nations that are most diverse in natural resources are also the richest countries in the Tropical North?

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The region's coasts, interior lowlands, plains, and highlands all have some type of tropical climate. This means that they are warm throughout the year.

Tropical Climates	
tropical monsoon	short dry season and long wet season with heavy rainfall
tropical wet-dry	high annual rainfall; most rain between May and October
tropical rain forest	no dry season

There are coastlines on the Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean. Much of the coastal and eastern lowlands of Ecuador and Colombia have a tropical monsoon climate. In the Chocó region of Colombia, it rains more than 300 days a year. More than 400 inches (1,016 cm) of rain fall each year. It is one of the wettest places on Earth.

The Llanos of Colombia and Venezuela have a tropical wet-dry climate. They get 40 to 70 inches (102–178 cm) of rain a year. The Guiana Highlands have a tropical monsoon climate in some places. In others, there is a tropical rain forest climate.

Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana have the same climate as Venezuela's highlands. Their coasts are cooled by the **trade winds**. These are steady winds that blow from higher latitudes toward the Equator. The cooler climate of the Caribbean coast of Venezuela and Colombia gets less than 20 inches (30 cm) of rain a year.

Mountain climates depend on the elevation. From 3,000 to 6,500 feet (914 to 1918 m), there is moderate rainfall. Temperatures average 65° to 75°F (18° to 24°C). Above this, it is colder. Above about 10,000 feet (3,048 m), average daily temperatures are below 50°F (10°C). Wind, fog, and light drizzle are common. Vegetation is mainly grasses and hardy shrubs. Above 15,000 feet (4,572 m), the ground is covered with snow and ice year round.

## Natural Resources

**Guiding Question** *Which natural resources are most important to the economies of the Tropical North's countries?*

Tropical rain forests cover much of the North. However, the region's physical geography and lack of roads make it difficult to use this resource. The North's largest countries, Venezuela and Colombia, are also its richest and most diverse in natural resources, as well.

## The Tropical North

### Lesson 1: Physical Geography of the Region, *continued*

Oil is found across much of the Tropical North. Venezuela is South America’s top producer of oil. It also has large gas deposits and is South America’s second-largest coal producer. Colombia is South America’s largest coal producer, and the third-largest oil producer. Oil makes up 40 percent of Ecuador’s exports.

Gold and diamonds are found throughout the region, with large amounts in some areas, as well as many other minerals and gems.

Mineral and Gem Production	
Gold	Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela,
Diamonds	Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname
Emeralds	Colombia
Bauxite	Guyana, Venezuela, Suriname
Copper, iron ore, other minerals	Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname

Ecuador and Colombia grow bananas and coffee as their main **cash crop**, or farm product grown for export, as well as corn, potatoes, beans, and cassava. Colombia produces rice, wheat, sugarcane, cotton, and cattle for sale. Venezuela grows coffee for export, as well as corn and rice, and some ranching is done there. Only about 10 percent of Venezuelans are farmers.

In Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana, most of the land is covered by rain forest. There is little farming done there and little in the way of oil or mineral resources.

 **Marking the Text**

8. Highlight the three countries in the region that produce the most oil.

 **Marking the Text**

9. Highlight the *cash crops* that are important to the economy of the Tropical North.

 **Reading Progress Check**

10. Which fossil fuel, mineral, and gem are most widespread in the Tropical North?

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## Writing

### Check for Understanding

1. **Informative/Explanatory** Choose a major geographical feature of the Tropical North and write three facts about that feature.

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2. **Informative/Explanatory** How are climate and elevation related in the Tropical North?

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