

South America's Readings

South America has some of the most diverse physical geography of any continent. In this lesson, we look at the mountains, forests, deserts, and grasslands of the continent.



A Diverse Continent

While only the fourth largest continent, South America has a great deal of diversity when it comes to its physical geography. From the soaring peaks of the Andes Mountains to the jungles of Brazil, the scorching hot deserts of Chile and the vastness of Patagonia, South America has it all. In this lesson, we will look at the four major physical geographic regions of the continent.

The Amazon

If you were to look at a photograph of South America from space, one of the first things you'd notice is the immense amount of green in the northeastern half of the continent. That is the **Amazon River Basin**. By amount of water, the Amazon is the world's largest river, draining from the Andes Mountains through thousands of miles of South America. Within its rain forests is a surprising amount of the world's biodiversity, and the Amazon helps transform carbon dioxide into 20% of the world's oxygen produced by all rainforests.

That said, you would also notice the intensive deforestation tactics used to harvest the Amazon's valuable lumber, as well as to produce more land for grazing and farming. Few areas of the world offer such stark contrast between human activity and nature.

The Andes

All that water must come from somewhere, and that somewhere happens to be the Andes Mountains. Stretching along the western shore of South America, this chain reaches from Venezuela to Cape Horn in the southernmost parts of the continent. The Andes have encouraged cultures quite unlike others found throughout South America, ranging from the great Inca Empire to today's states of Bolivia and Peru. Geologically speaking, the Andes are still a young mountain chain, and are a part of the Pacific Rim of Fire. Earthquakes are not uncommon in this part of the world.

The Atacama

The Andes helps to create the border of the driest desert on earth, the Atacama Desert. Stretching for almost 600 miles from north to south, it can be decades before rain falls in this barren part of the world. As such, other than a few well-financed mining expeditions and astronomy observatories, human life has largely left the Atacama untouched.

Grasslands

To the east of the Atacama is a very different tale. Here we find the great grasslands of South America. Much of northern Argentina is part of the **Pampas**, a fertile grassland that would cover half Mongolia in agriculture. However, that is not even a third of the land to be found in this part of South America. A journey to the south leads one to stumble into **Patagonia**, the vast grasslands and semi-arid regions that stretch from the Pampas to Cape Hope. Argentine and Uruguayan cowboys, known as **Gauchos**, built a herding culture that rivals that of cowboys from the Old West.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson we looked at the physical geography of South America. We started by examining the most prominent feature of South American physical geography, the **Amazon Basin**. From there we looked at the source of the Amazon, the Andes, as well as the Atacama Desert. Finally, we learned about the grasslands of South America, such as the **Pampas** and **Patagonia**.

South America Virtual Field Trip

