Central and South America: Location

The study of location is the first theme of geography. When looking at Central and South America, their locations affect the nature of the life of the people who live there. The countries of this region are located from along the equator to approximately 30 degrees North latitude and 55 degrees South latitude. The region extends from 35 degrees West longitude to 115 degrees West longitude.

The South American continent is bordered to the northeast by the Atlantic Ocean and to the north by the Caribbean Sea. To the west, South America is bordered by the Pacific Ocean; to the southeast is the South Atlantic Ocean. Central America includes the countries from Mexico in the north to Panama in the south. The Pacific Ocean is on the west, and the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea are on the east.

South and Central America were the homes to several ancient Indian civilizations. These civilizations had established very detailed cultures, languages, religions, and practices. But with the exploration of the Europeans, the "White man" brought diseases that the natives had not previously seen. As a result, many ancient civilizations were wiped out because the natives got sick and died. Others were conquered by the Europeans through force.

The relative location of Central and South America has helped many of its countries develop. Located to the south of the United States, Central America has been closely involved with the history of the southwestern United States through colonization attempts and civil wars. First Spain and then Mexico claimed much of the southwestern United States during the colonial period and up to the war between Mexico and the United States. The United States has also become involved in the affairs of many of the Central and South American countries. For example, the United States helped Panama become an independent nation because it contained the best location for a canal that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

South America's location near the equator allows many of its countries to support various types of agriculture. Anything from fruits and nuts to coffee, grains, and livestock is produced on the continent.
Central and South America: Place

When looking at the second theme of geography, place, we need to look at the special characteristics that make Central and South America unique on the earth.

The physical characteristics of the South American region are generally tropical. South America is located on and near the equator. Jungles and wetlands dominate the landscape. The country of Brazil is located near the center of the continent. The Amazon River snakes through the country, watering the interior of the continent and providing nourishment to the wetlands. The Andes Mountains run the length of the continent along the western coast from north to south. The country of Argentina is at the southernmost tip of South America.

Central America is an isthmus, a narrow body of land connecting two larger landmasses. Mexico is the largest country in this region and has a warm, arid climate.

Major cities in South America and Central America, such as Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santiago, Chile; and Mexico City, Mexico; are modern, bustling areas of commerce and culture. They are among some of the largest cities in the world.

The human characteristics of the Central and South American region are diverse. Many of the citizens can trace their backgrounds back to Native Americans and/or their European conquerors. Language in the region is primarily Spanish; however, the language of Brazil is Portuguese. The major religion is Catholicism. Housing and dwellings vary with the location. In the Andes Mountains, huts are built for warmth. In the Amazon Jungle, dwellings are built to provide air circulation and protection from the sun. Just as the dwellings are diverse, so are the physical and human characteristics.
Central and South America: Place—Questions

Directions: Answer the following questions.

1. Describe the physical characteristics of South America. _______

2. Describe the physical characteristics of Central America.

3. Describe the human characteristics of South America.

4. Describe the human characteristics of Central America.

5. Define isthmus.
Central and South America: Interactions

Assessing the interactions between humans and the environment is the fourth theme of geography. Humans become adapted to living in a specific environment and, in turn, try to change the environment to better fit their needs.

South America is the fourth largest continent and the fifth largest in population. The terrain of South America affects the lives of its peoples.

Nearly half of all South Americans make their living by farming. Most farms are quite small and can produce only enough food for the families that own them. Most of these people use old-fashioned ways of farming, with no machinery. There are huge modern farms and ranches; however, they are owned by a small number of wealthy people. Some of these farms are larger than some of the states of the United States. The farms grow huge quantities of coffee, cacao, wheat, sugar, bananas, rice, and other foods.

The rain forests, hot, moist, and thick with vegetation, might seem to be an ideal place for farming. But when it is cleared of trees, the jungle soil loses the important nutrients crops need to grow. Much of the rain forest has been cut down in a futile attempt to create farmland. However, after only a few years of farming, the land becomes unproductive.

Life in the big cities of South America is much like life in the cities of North America. There are tall, modern buildings, airports, and busy streets. However, many of the Native Americans who live outside the cities still live the way their ancestors did.

In the mountains, the population must be prepared for severe, cold weather. In the desert regions, residents must adapt to the extremely hot and dry climate.
Central and South America: Interactions—Questions

Directions: Answer the following questions:

1. How do most South Americans make a living? ______________________

2. List six major agricultural products of South America.
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 
   d. 
   e. 
   f. 

3. When the rain forests and jungles are cleared of trees, what happens to the soil?

4. Only a few wealthy people control much of the land. In your opinion, why do you suppose this is?
Central and South America: Movement

Movement is the fourth theme of geography, and it is the study of how people, goods, and ideas travel around the globe. Movement has been extremely important in the development of Central and South America.

Ancestors of Native Americans crossed a narrow bridge of land between what is now Alaska and Siberia thousands of years ago. Over the centuries, the Native Americans populated all of North, Central, and South America. In the Andes Mountains, a sophisticated Native American group called the Incas thrived and created a huge empire. The lands once controlled by the Incas now make up the nations of Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

Just like North America, South America was explored and conquered by Europeans after about 1500. People from Spain, Portugal, and other European countries took over the land, some of which had been inhabited by Native Americans for centuries. Many wars have been fought over the years, but the borders of many of today's South American countries have existed for over one hundred years.

Using the different waterways in South America, such as the Amazon River, the people have been able to move goods and ideas into otherwise unreachable areas of the continent. However, railroads and highways have not been developed as much as they have in the United States.

Like North Americans, most Central and South Americans speak the language of the European country that once ruled the area in which they live. For example, Brazil was once a colony of Portugal, and today most Brazilians speak Portuguese. Many other South American countries were once dominated by Spain, and Spanish is widely spoken on the continent. There are many Native Americans in South America who still speak the languages of their ancestors.
Central and South America: Movement—Questions

Directions: Answer the following questions:

1. What route did the ancestors of Native Americans take to get to South America?

2. Name the Native American empire that once controlled the lands now known as Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

3. List two languages spoken in the countries of South America.
   a.
   b.

4. How is the theme of movement important to the study of geography?
Central and South America: Regions

Within Central and South America there are many different smaller areas and regions. The fifth theme of geography is regions. This theme deals with the characteristics in different places that are similar.

South America has many important cities. The biggest of them is Sao Paulo, Brazil—one of the largest cities in the world. Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, are also in the world’s top ten in population. All three cities are very modern and have a lot of industry. If you look at these three cities on the map, you will see they all have something in common: they are all near the Atlantic coast. They all grew up around or very close to natural ports, or places where ships could safely dock.

South America's largest and most populated country is Brazil. More people live in Brazil than in all other South American countries combined. Brazil is also the continent’s leading industrial nation. Argentina is the second-largest South American country.

Argentina contains a large ranching region. It is one of the largest producers of beef in the world. Herds of beef cattle and sheep are raised on giant ranches. Venezuela and Ecuador are among the oil-producing nations of the world. Oil rigs drill into the earth and bring up crude oil. These two nations are the largest oil exporters in South America. An export is a product that is made and sent out of the country to be sold. An import is a product made in another country and brought in to be sold.

Different physical regions in Central and South America include mountains, grasslands, deserts, rain forests, and coastal areas.

Nearly a fourth of all the species of animals known live in South America. As in other parts of the world, people are hunting these animals or attempting to develop the lands the animals live on, so many creatures are in danger of becoming extinct.

Soccer, or futbol in Spanish, is one of the world’s most widely played sports. It is the national sport of several South American countries, so this could be considered a soccer-playing region.