

Encyclopedic Entry

landscape

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A [landscape](#) is part of the Earth's surface that can be viewed at one time from one place. It consists of the geographic features that mark, or are characteristic of, a particular area.

The term comes from the Dutch word *landschap*, the name given to paintings of the countryside. [Geographers](#) have borrowed the word from artists. Although [landscape paintings](#) have existed since ancient Roman times (landscape [frescoes](#) are present in the [ruins of Pompeii](#)), they were reborn during the [Renaissance](#) in Northern Europe. Painters ignored people or scenes in landscape art, and made the land itself the subject of paintings. Famous Dutch landscape painters include Jacob van Ruisdael and [Vincent van Gogh](#).

An artist paints a landscape; a geographer studies it. Some geographers, such as [Otto Schluter](#), actually define geography as landscape science. Schluter was the first scientist to write specifically of natural landscapes and cultural landscapes.

A [natural landscape](#) is made up of a collection of [landforms](#), such as [mountains](#), [hills](#), [plains](#), and [plateaus](#). [Lakes](#), [streams](#), soils (such as [sand](#) or [clay](#)), and natural [vegetation](#) are other features of natural landscapes. A [desert](#) landscape, for instance, usually indicates sandy [soil](#) and few [deciduous](#) trees. Even desert landscapes can vary: The hilly sand dunes of the [Sahara Desert](#) landscape are very different from the [cactus](#)-dotted landscape of the [Mojave Desert](#) of the American Southwest, for instance.

[Cultural Landscape](#)

A landscape that people have modified is called a cultural landscape. People and the plants they grow, the animals they care for, and the structures they build make up cultural landscapes. Such landscapes can vary greatly. They can be as different as a vast [cattle](#) ranch in Argentina or the [urban landscape](#) of Tokyo, Japan.

Since 1992, the [United Nations](#) has recognized significant interactions between people and the natural landscape as official cultural landscapes. The international organization protects these sites from destruction, and identifies them as tourist destinations.

The World Heritage Committee of [UNESCO](#) (the United Nations Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization) defines a cultural landscape in three ways.

The first is a clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man. The Archaeological Landscape of the First Coffee Plantations in the South-East of Cuba, near Santiago, Cuba, is an example of this type of cultural landscape.

The second type of cultural landscape is an organically evolved landscape. An organically evolved landscape is one where the spiritual, economic, and cultural significance of an area developed along with its physical characteristics. The Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape, along the banks of the Orkhon River in central Mongolia, is an example of an organically evolved landscape. The Orkhon Valley has been used by Mongolian nomads since the 8th century as pastureland for their horses and other animals. Mongolian herders still use the rich river valley for pastureland today.

The last type of cultural landscape is an associative cultural landscape. An associative landscape is much like an organically evolved landscape, except physical evidence of historical human use of the site may be missing. Its significance is an association with spiritual, economic, or cultural features of a people. Tongariro National Park in New Zealand is an associative cultural landscape for the Maori people. The mountains in the park symbolize the link between the Maori and the physical environment.

People and the Natural Landscape

The growth of technology has increased our ability to change a natural landscape. An example of human impact on landscape can be seen along the coastline of the Netherlands. Water from the North Sea was pumped out of certain areas, uncovering the fertile soil below. Dikes and dams were built to keep water from these areas, now used for farming and other purposes.

Dams can change a natural landscape by flooding it. The Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, in Yichang, China, is the worlds largest electric power plant. The Three Gorges Dam project has displaced more than 1.2 million people and permanently altered the flow of the Yangtze River, changing both the physical and cultural landscape of the region.

Many human activities increase the rate at which natural processes, such as weathering and erosion, shape the landscape. The cutting of forests exposes more soil to wind and water erosion. Pollution such as acid rain often speeds up the weathering, or breakdown, of the Earths rocky surface.

By studying natural and cultural landscapes, geographers learn how peoples activities affect the land. Their studies may suggest ways that will help us protect the delicate balance of Earths ecosystems.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
acid rain	<i>noun</i>	precipitation with high levels of nitric and sulfuric acids. Acid rain can be manmade or occur naturally.
cactus	<i>noun</i>	type of plant native to dry regions.
cattle	<i>noun</i>	cows and oxen.
clay	<i>noun</i>	type of sedimentary rock that is able to be shaped when wet.
cultural landscape	<i>noun</i>	human imprint on the physical environment.
dam	<i>noun</i>	structure built across a river or other waterway to control the flow of water.
deciduous	<i>adjective</i>	type of plant that sheds its leaves once a year.
desert	<i>noun</i>	area of land that receives no more than 25 centimeters (10 inches) of precipitation a year.

dike	<i>noun</i>	a barrier, usually a natural or artificial wall used to regulate water levels.
displace	<i>verb</i>	to remove or force to evacuate.
ecosystem	<i>noun</i>	community and interactions of living and nonliving things in an area.
erosion	<i>noun</i>	act in which earth is worn away, often by water, wind, or ice.
farming	<i>noun</i>	the art, science, and business of cultivating the land for growing crops.
fertile	<i>adjective</i>	able to produce crops or sustain agriculture.
flood	<i>noun</i>	overflow of a body of water onto land.
fresco	<i>noun</i>	art or design painted directly into the wet plaster of a wall or other surface.
geographer	<i>noun</i>	person who studies places and the relationships between people and their environments.
hill	<i>noun</i>	land that rises above its surroundings and has a rounded summit, usually less than 300 meters (1,000 feet).
intentional	<i>adjective</i>	deliberate or on-purpose.
lake	<i>noun</i>	body of water surrounded by land.
landform	<i>noun</i>	specific natural feature on the Earth's surface.
landscape	<i>noun</i>	the geographic features of a region.
landscape painting	<i>noun</i>	painting depicting geographic features able to be viewed at one time from one place.
Mojave Desert	<i>noun</i>	arid landscape in the U.S. states of California, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah.
mountain	<i>noun</i>	landmass that forms as tectonic plates interact with each other.
natural landscape	<i>noun</i>	geographic features not created by humans that are characteristic of an area.
nomad	<i>noun</i>	person who moves from place to place, without a fixed home.
Otto Schluter	<i>noun</i>	(1872-1959) German geographer.
pasture	<i>noun</i>	type of agricultural land used for grazing livestock.
plain	<i>noun</i>	flat, smooth area at a low elevation.
plateau	<i>noun</i>	large region that is higher than the surrounding area and relatively flat.
pollution	<i>noun</i>	introduction of harmful materials into the environment.
Pompeii	<i>noun</i>	city in southwest Italy that was buried by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE.
power plant	<i>noun</i>	industrial facility for the generation of electric energy.
Renaissance	<i>noun</i>	period of great development in science, art, and economy in Western Europe from the 14th to the 17th centuries.
ruin	<i>noun</i>	remains of a destroyed building or set of buildings.
Sahara Desert	<i>noun</i>	world's largest desert, in north Africa.
sand	<i>noun</i>	small, loose grains of disintegrated rocks.

soil	<i>noun</i>	top layer of the Earth's surface where plants can grow.
stream	<i>noun</i>	body of flowing fluid.
symbolize	<i>verb</i>	to represent an object, idea, organization, or geographical region.
technology	<i>noun</i>	the science of using tools and complex machines to make human life easier or more profitable.
Three Gorges Dam	<i>noun</i>	electrical power plant along the Yangtze River in China.
UNESCO	<i>noun</i>	the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.
United Nations	<i>noun</i>	international organization that works for peace, security and cooperation.
urban landscape	<i>noun</i>	physical features of a city.
vegetation	<i>noun</i>	all the plant life of a specific place.
Vincent van Gogh	<i>noun</i>	(1853-1890) Dutch painter.
weathering	<i>noun</i>	the breaking down or dissolving of the Earth's surface rocks and minerals.

For Further Exploration

Images

- National Geographic Photography: Landscape Photos

Websites

- USGS: Land Cover Institute



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