

Encyclopedic Entry

steppe

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A **steppe** is a dry, grassy **plain**. Steppes occur in **temperate climates**, which lie between the **tropics** and **polar** regions. Temperate regions have **distinct seasonal temperature** changes, with cold winters and warm summers.

Steppes are semi-**arid**, meaning they receive 25 to 50 centimeters (10-20 inches) of **rain** each year. This is enough rain to support short **grasses**, but not enough for **tall grasses** or trees to grow. Many kinds of grasses grow on steppes, but few grow taller than half a meter (20 inches).

Eurasian Steppe

The largest temperate **grassland** in the world is the **Eurasian steppe**, **extending** from Hungary to China. It reaches almost one-fifth of the way around the Earth. The Eurasian steppe is so well-known, the area is sometimes referred to as just The Steppe.

The Eurasian steppe has historically been one of the most important **routes** for **travel** and **trade**. The flat expanse provides an **ideal** route between Asia and Europe. **Caravans** of horses, donkeys, and camels have traveled the Eurasian steppe for thousands of years. The most famous **trade route** on the Eurasian steppe is the **Silk Road**, connecting China, India, and Europe. The Silk Road was **established** around 200 BCE, and many Silk Road trade routes are still in use today.

During the 13th century, Mongolian leader **Genghis Khan conquered** almost the entire Eurasian steppe. With expert horsemen, Khan conquered **territory** from his home in what is now Mongolia, through China, Central Asia, and the land around the Caspian Sea.

The **equestrian** culture that was so important to Genghis Khan is still important for most **cultures** native to the Eurasian steppe. From the Mongolian tradition in the east to the **Cossack** traditions of western Russia, these cultures have relied on horses for travel, trade, and conquest on the vast steppe. To this day, many festivals and community activities focus on horseback riding.

Other Steppes

The dry, **shortgrass prairie** of North America's **Great Plains** is also a steppe. The shortgrass prairie lies on the western edge of the Great Plains, in the **rain shadow** of the Rocky Mountains. It extends from the U.S. state of Texas in the south to the **province** of Saskatchewan, Canada, in the north.

Many of the world's steppes have been converted to **cropland** and **pasture**. Short grasses that grow naturally on steppes provide grazing for cattle, goats, horses, camels, and sheep. Sometimes steppes are overgrazed, which occurs when there are more animals than the land can support.

When the short grasses of the steppe are **plowed** under for **agriculture**, the **soil** can **erode** very quickly. Important **nutrients** **anchored** in the soil by grasses are simply blown or washed away. **Agricultural development** can also **degrade** the soil with **fertilizer** and other chemicals. This is called **overcultivation**.

Overcultivation can make grasslands look like **deserts**. The soil cannot **retain** enough water or nutrients for vegetation to grow. True deserts, however, receive less rainfall (less than 25 centimeters per year) than steppes.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
adapt	<i>verb</i>	to adjust to new surroundings or a new situation.
agricultural development	<i>noun</i>	modern farming methods that include mechanical, chemical, engineering and technological methods. Also called industrial agriculture.
agriculture	<i>noun</i>	the art and science of cultivating the land for growing crops (farming) or raising livestock (ranching).
American buffalo	<i>noun</i>	wild ruminant native to the North American prairie. Technically called bison.
anchor	<i>verb</i>	to hold firmly in place.
arid	<i>adjective</i>	dry.
Baikonur Cosmodrome	<i>noun</i>	(1955) Russian spaceport in Baikonur, Kazakhstan.
bison	<i>noun</i>	large mammal native to North America. Also called American buffalo.
caravan	<i>noun</i>	group of people who travel together for safety and companionship through difficult territory.
climate	<i>noun</i>	all weather conditions for a given location over a period of time.
conquer	<i>verb</i>	to overcome an enemy or obstacle.
conservation	<i>noun</i>	management of a natural resource to prevent exploitation, destruction, or neglect.
convert	<i>verb</i>	to change from one thing to another.
Cossack	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to western Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine.
crop	<i>noun</i>	agricultural produce.
culture	<i>noun</i>	learned behavior of people, including their languages, belief systems, social structures, institutions, and material goods.
degrade	<i>verb</i>	to lower the quality of something.
desert	<i>noun</i>	area of land that receives no more than 25 centimeters (10 inches) of precipitation a year.
distinct	<i>adjective</i>	unique or identifiable.
equestrian	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with horses.
erode	<i>verb</i>	to wear away.
establish	<i>verb</i>	to form or officially organize.

Eurasian steppe	<i>noun</i>	dry, flat grassland stretching from Asia to Eastern Europe.
expanse	<i>noun</i>	large area.
extend	<i>verb</i>	to enlarge or continue.
fertilizer	<i>noun</i>	nutrient-rich chemical substance (natural or manmade) applied to soil to encourage plant growth.
Genghis Khan	<i>noun</i>	(1162-1227) founder of the Mongol empire.
grass	<i>noun</i>	type of plant with narrow leaves.
grassland	<i>noun</i>	ecosystem with large, flat areas of grasses.
graze	<i>verb</i>	to feed on grass, usually over a wide pasture.
Great Plains	<i>noun</i>	grassland region of North America, between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River.
habitat	<i>noun</i>	environment where an organism lives throughout the year or for shorter periods of time.
horseman	<i>noun</i>	person who is skilled in riding and managing horses.
ideal	<i>adjective</i>	perfect.
manned	<i>adjective</i>	carrying one or more people.
nutrient	<i>noun</i>	substance an organism needs for energy, growth, and life.
overcultivation	<i>noun</i>	process of growing too many crops in too short a time period on one area of land.
overgrazing	<i>noun</i>	process of too many animals feeding on one area of pasture or grassland.
pasture	<i>noun</i>	type of agricultural land used for grazing livestock.
plain	<i>noun</i>	flat, smooth area at a low elevation.
plow	<i>noun, verb</i>	tool used for cutting, lifting, and turning the soil in preparation for planting.
polar	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the North and/or South Pole.
province	<i>noun</i>	division of a country larger than a town or county.
rain	<i>noun</i>	liquid precipitation.
rain shadow	<i>noun</i>	dry land on the side of a mountain facing away from prevailing winds.
retain	<i>verb</i>	to keep.
route	<i>noun</i>	path or way.
seasonal	<i>adjective</i>	likely to change with the seasons.
shortgrass prairie	<i>noun</i>	large, flat region of land covered by grasses less than a meter (3 feet) tall.
Silk Road	<i>noun</i>	ancient trade route through Central Asia linking China and the Mediterranean Sea.
soil	<i>noun</i>	top layer of the Earth's surface where plants can grow.
spacecraft	<i>noun</i>	vehicle designed for travel outside Earth's atmosphere.
spaceport	<i>noun</i>	facility for launching vehicles or capsules into space.

steppe	<i>noun</i>	dry, flat grassland with no trees and a cool climate.
tall grass	<i>noun</i>	type of grass that stands an average of 1.5 meters (5 feet) tall, such as switchgrass.
temperate	<i>adjective</i>	moderate.
temperature	<i>noun</i>	degree of hotness or coldness measured by a thermometer with a numerical scale.
territory	<i>noun</i>	land an animal, human, or government protects from intruders.
trade	<i>noun</i>	buying, selling, or exchanging of goods and services.
trade route	<i>noun</i>	path followed by merchants or explorers to exchange goods and services.
travel	<i>noun</i>	movement from one place to another.
tropics	<i>plural noun</i>	region generally located between the Tropic of Cancer (23 1/2 degrees north of the Equator) and the Tropic of Capricorn (23 1/2 degrees south of the Equator).
unmanned	<i>adjective</i>	lacking the physical presence of a person.
vegetation	<i>noun</i>	all the plant life of a specific place.

For Further Exploration

Articles & Profiles

- National Geographic News: Climate Change Driving Mongolians From Steppe to Cities
- National Geographic Environment: Grasslands

Websites

- USAID: Mongolia—SCAPES



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