

Encyclopedic Entry

North America: Human Geography

Culture and Politics

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North America, the third-largest [continent](#), extends from the tiny Aleutian Islands in the northwest to the Isthmus of Panama in the south.

North America's [physical geography](#), [environment](#) and [resources](#), and [human geography](#) can be considered separately.

North America and South America are named after Italian [navigator](#) Amerigo Vespucci. Vespucci was the first European to suggest that the Americas were not part of the [East Indies](#), but an entirely separate landmass. The portions of the landmass that widened out north of the [Isthmus](#) of Panama became known as North America.

Today, North America is home to the [citizens](#) of Canada, the United States, Greenland, Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the island countries and territories of the Caribbean Sea and western North Atlantic Ocean.

North America's human landscape closely mirrors that of its physical environment: varied, rich, and constantly changing. From their beginnings to the present day, the peoples of North America have worked with and against their surroundings in order to survive and [prosper](#).

Historic Cultures

[Indigenous](#) cultures shaped, and were shaped by, the [geography](#) of North America. The first North Americans are believed to have [migrated](#) from Siberia, in northeast Asia, by crossing a [land bridge](#) over the Bering Strait. These populations fanned out southward, to present-day Florida, California, Mexico, and Central America.

The Olmec and the Maya, indigenous to Central America, built the first cities on the continent, eventually leading to the great urban areas of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. These cities, in what is now central Mexico, boasted [sophisticated engineering](#) structures, such as [canals](#), apartment buildings, and [irrigation](#) systems.

Many of these early North American cultures were scientifically and agriculturally advanced. Mayan calendars and [almanacs](#) recorded [celestial](#) events such as [eclipses](#) and [seasonal](#) changes. The Mayans were also mathematically advanced. Their counting system was able to represent very large numbers using only three symbols: dots, lines, and a football-shaped symbol that indicated a zero. The Mayans were, in fact, the first culture to have a written symbol for zero.

Cultures throughout southern North America harvested corn, squash, and beans in regular cycles. This sort of [agriculture](#) allowed major [civilizations](#) to develop. People were no longer bound to produce food and shelter for

their families—some people could work in the food and construction industries while others became engineers, artists, and political leaders. Leading North American civilizations include the Maya and Aztec, in what is now Mexico, and the Iroquois, native to southeastern Canada and the northeastern United States.

The vastness of the northern part of the continent encouraged other indigenous communities to live [nomadic](#) lifestyles. These cultures did not establish urban areas or agricultural centers. Instead, they followed favorable [weather patterns](#), natural agricultural cycles, and animal migrations.

The Plains Indians, for example, followed the seasonal grazing and migration of the American [bison](#). Plains Indians include Lakota, Blackfoot, and Nez Perce. Plains Indians ate bison meat as their primary source of food, and used [hides](#) and bones to create dwellings, tools, and clothing. The range of the bison, which stretched from the southern [Prairie Provinces](#) of Canada, through the [Great Plains](#), to the U.S.-Mexico border, coincided with the extent of Plains Indian communities. They were so [interdependent](#) that the eventual extinction of bison in many areas of the United States—through [overhunting](#), [development](#), and anti-indigenous [federal](#) policies—dramatically weakened the power and influence of the Plains people.

The environment also impacted the traditional beliefs and social structure of North American indigenous communities. For instance, the Inuit, native to the Arctic, were deeply influenced by the [aurora borealis](#), or Northern Lights. They believed the amazing light displays were images of their family and friends in the afterlife, the souls of animals and spirits, and visual guides for hunting. Inuit also believed that all things have souls, and that spirits existed to protect those souls. By respecting the [ecosystem](#) (the living and nonliving things in an environment), Inuit communities aimed to maintain a balanced existence.

Contemporary Cultures

Contemporary North American societies are also greatly influenced by the continent's rich and varied environment. Our globalized world has pressed these societies to develop complex ways of interacting with, and profiting from, geographic resources.

North America's economic base is centered largely on the extraction, development, and [trade of natural resources](#). Local communities, as well as national governments and regional organizations, also use natural resources. Guatemala, for example, has a traditional medicine system, which includes [herbalists](#) and spiritualists who use medicinal plants to treat [ailments](#). Costa Rica has developed a network of [sustainable](#) and [fair-trade](#) coffee growers tailored to a growing international market.

Tourism is also an important part of North America's [economy](#), especially for the small island nations of the Caribbean Sea. These island nations offer pristine tropical environments. Their multicolored coral reefs are one of the premier diving destinations in the world. The islands' historical ties to the United States and Europe ease travel arrangements and language barriers. The islands see about 20 million visitors every year. In 2010, tourism contributed more than \$39 billion to the region's economy.

Some organizations promote tourism that is more beneficial to local economies and ecosystems. The Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism, for example, aims to promote the sustainable management of the region's natural resources. [Sustainable tourism](#) supports development of local businesses, as opposed to global corporations such as international hotel chains.

The Caribbean tourism industry is also developing more [ecotourism](#) opportunities for visitors. Ecotourism encourages tourists to have a minimal impact on the natural environment. Ecotourism promotes travel to natural destinations, such as coral reefs, instead of developed destinations such as [casinos](#).

North America's multicultural history is another defining feature of the continent's human geography. [Immigrants](#) have sought opportunities, particularly in the United States and Canada, for hundreds of years. Immigrants from

Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America have contributed to the development of the continent. Immigrants or children of immigrants to North America have become scientific, business, and cultural leaders.

The strong presence of immigrants is reflected in present-day ethnic [neighborhoods](#): the Cuban “Little Havana” in Miami, Florida; the Somali “Little Mogadishu” in Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Korean “Koreatown” in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; and the North African “Little Maghreb” in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, are just a few. Mexico City’s “Barrio Chino” is one of the smallest Chinatowns in the world, only two city blocks in length. Yet Barrio Chino counts 3,000 families of Chinese heritage within its boundaries.

Many immigrants are [refugees](#). According to the United Nations, a refugee is a person who resides outside the country of their nationality for fear of being [persecuted](#). Refugees may fear economic hardship, or political or social pressure. Refugees may also immigrate because of a [natural disaster](#).

Major refugee populations in Canada include residents fleeing [civil war](#) in Sri Lanka, [political oppression](#) in Pakistan, and violence in Colombia. Major refugee populations in the United States include residents fleeing [poverty](#) in Ethiopia, political oppression in Vietnam and Cuba, and [earthquakes](#) in Haiti.

Since 2006, Ottawa, Canada, has been the site for World Refugee Week, which features the work of artists, academics, and activists from around the globe. This celebration of diversity is echoed in the many ethnic and cultural celebrations that take place across North America.

Political Geography

North America's history and development have been shaped by its political geography. [Political geography](#) is the internal and external relationships between its various [governments](#), citizens, and territories.

Historic Issues

Contact between the indigenous people of North America and European explorers was the defining moment for the continent’s political geography. Italian explorer Christopher Columbus’ first landing on Caribbean soil in 1492 set in motion the voyages of other Europeans: Spanish explorers Hernando De Soto and Ponce de Leon; French explorer Jacques Cartier; and British explorers Sebastian Cabot and Henry Hudson.

The voyages of these explorers inspired various European countries to claim and [colonize](#) North American soil. European colonizers found different ways to work with and against North America’s indigenous communities.

Colonizers in the present-day U.S. pushed native populations to the west. Through disease, war, and forced relocation, many native communities were exterminated. The large indigenous territories were reduced to isolated [reservations](#).

Colonizers in present-day Canada set up a reservation system that protected many Indian settlements but isolated them from development. Intermarriage between Europeans and natives created a French-Indian community known today as the [Metis](#).

In Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, native populations were more fully integrated into the political and social systems. [Mestizos](#), people of European and indigenous descent, have greatly contributed to the social structure and culture of Latin America.

Cooperation and conflict have dramatically affected the relationships between North American countries. The United States and Canada have the longest [non-militarized](#) border in the world, for instance. This peaceful border reflects a stable, cooperative relationship between the two countries.

North America's history is dotted with conflict, however. The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) resulted in the United States acquiring 1,294,994 square kilometers (500,000 square miles) of Mexican territory, extending from the Rio Grande to the Pacific Coast.

Conflicts have also caused tensions among residents of a single country. The Seven Years' War (1756-1763) resulted in all French territory east of the Mississippi River being ceded to Britain. This dramatically shifted Canada's political geography, creating divisions between French Canadians and those of the British Commonwealth. This division still influences Canadian politics.

North American countries have also suffered through civil wars. The civil wars that occurred in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador between the 1970s and 1990s killed tens of thousands of [civilians](#) and pushed many others to immigrate to Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The region also became a hotspot for [foreign policy](#) and financial assistance. The United States, for instance, aimed to protect its economic and political interests by backing various military governments and [guerrilla](#) groups.

Contemporary Issues

Today, North America's political geography is deeply influenced by economic and [demographic](#) trends. Two important policies—the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, signed in 1994) and the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR, signed in 2004)—have affected trade between countries on the continent. Most significantly, the agreements have reduced or eliminated duties and tariffs. A duty is a kind of [tax](#) charged for items purchased outside the country. A [tariff](#) is another kind of tax, charged on imports and exports.

Both policies have eliminated duties on U.S. and Canadian agricultural exports, such as corn, wheat, and soybeans. The agreements have also reduced tariffs on goods like coffee, sugar, fruits, and vegetables. These are important exports for the rest of the continent.

While the agreements have eased trade between countries and regions of North America, they have also caused major political and economic problems. Corn imports to Mexico have impoverished many Mexican farmers, who cannot compete against the lower U.S. or Canadian prices.

NAFTA is also believed to have pushed many industries out of the United States and into the cheaper [labor markets](#) of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Companies find it less expensive to manufacture goods in these places for many reasons. Wages are lower and there are fewer health and safety regulations. Because there are often fewer restrictions on child labor and fewer opportunities for education, many companies find many more workers. These cheaper labor markets reduce the strength of the U.S. [manufacturing sector](#).

Immigration is perhaps the most sensitive aspect of North America's political geography. Most immigration is fueled by poverty. People from North America's underdeveloped nations, such as Haiti, frequently immigrate to the continent's developed countries, such as the United States.

Immigration can be a long, difficult process. It involves more than just the physical migration from one nation to another. The governments of both countries must agree to the migration. Immigrants must often learn a new language and culture, including ways of dressing, eating, and socializing. Immigrants wishing to become citizens must also take classes to prove they are loyal to their new country. Often, immigrants must depend on luck: In the United States and Canada, lottery systems often determine which immigrants can legally migrate.

As a result of these difficulties, many impoverished immigrants from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America have illegally settled in developed countries. Illegal immigrants migrate for the same reasons legal immigrants do—to look for better economic and political opportunities.

Critics of illegal immigration say these immigrants are more likely to commit a crime and use [public welfare](#)

programs, such as those that help pay for education and medical care. Critics say these immigrants do not contribute to society by paying taxes that fund these public programs.

Future Issues

After the **terrorist** attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States and all of North America became more concerned with safety. National security at the international, regional, and domestic level will continue to be an important issue. Internationally, the developed countries of North America, especially the United States, continue to negotiate their **diplomatic** presence in the world while protecting themselves from terrorist attacks at home.

Drug trafficking has become more pronounced regionally, especially along the Panama-Colombia border and the U.S.-Mexico border. This trade has been linked to the extreme violence that currently afflicts northern Mexico, damaging political relations between Mexico and the United States.

One of the most important aspects of North America's political and financial future rests largely on its efforts to minimize the effects of **climate change**.

The regulation or reduction of **carbon emissions** is perhaps the most important part of reducing **global warming** and minimizing the effects of climate change. As part of the 2009 international agreement known as the Copenhagen Accord, some North American countries agreed to reduce emissions. The United States, one of the world's largest producers of emissions, agreed to reduce **greenhouse gas** emissions by 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. Costa Rica pledged to be entirely **carbon neutral** by 2021.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
agriculture	<i>noun</i>	the art and science of cultivating the land for growing crops (farming) or raising livestock (ranching).
ailment	<i>noun</i>	illness or disease.
almanac	<i>noun</i>	annual publication containing a calendar, astronomical information, and weather forecasts.
aurora borealis	<i>noun</i>	bright bands of color around the North Pole caused by solar wind and the Earth's magnetic field. Also called the northern lights.
bison	<i>noun</i>	large mammal native to North America. Also called American buffalo.
canal	<i>noun</i>	artificial waterway.
carbon emission	<i>noun</i>	carbon compound released into the air through the burning of fossil fuels such as coal or gas.
carbon neutral	<i>noun</i>	situation that produces no more greenhouse gas emissions than it consumes.
casino	<i>noun</i>	building filled with equipment and games for gambling.
celestial	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the sky or heavens.
citizen	<i>noun</i>	member of a country, state, or town who shares responsibilities for the area and benefits from being a member.
civilian	<i>noun</i>	person who is not in the military.
civilization	<i>noun</i>	complex way of life that developed as humans began to develop urban settlements.

civil war	<i>noun</i>	conflict between groups in the same country or nation.
climate change	<i>noun</i>	gradual changes in all the interconnected weather elements on our planet.
colonize	<i>verb</i>	to establish control of a foreign land and culture.
contemporary	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the present time period.
continent	<i>noun</i>	one of the seven main land masses on Earth.
demographic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the social characteristics and statistics of a population.
development	<i>noun</i>	construction or preparation of land for housing, industry, or agriculture.
diplomat	<i>noun</i>	person who negotiates important political and economic agreements, usually for a government.
diversity	<i>noun</i>	difference.
drug trafficking	<i>noun</i>	buying, selling and transporting of illegal drugs.
earthquake	<i>noun</i>	the sudden shaking of Earth's crust caused by the release of energy along fault lines or from volcanic activity.
East Indies	<i>noun</i>	southeast Asia.
eclipse	<i>noun</i>	an event where one heavenly body obscures another.
economy	<i>noun</i>	system of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.
ecosystem	<i>noun</i>	community and interactions of living and nonliving things in an area.
ecotourism	<i>noun</i>	act and industry of traveling for pleasure with concern for minimal environmental impact.
eliminate	<i>verb</i>	to remove.
engineering	<i>noun</i>	the art and science of building, maintaining, moving, and demolishing structures.
environment	<i>noun</i>	conditions that surround and influence an organism or community.
fair-trade	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with sales that support farmers in developing countries and promote sustainable farming practices.
federal	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with a nation's government (as opposed to local or regional government).
foreign policy	<i>noun</i>	courses of action or thought that guide a nation's relationship with other nations.
geography	<i>noun</i>	study of places and the relationships between people and their environments.
global warming	<i>noun</i>	increase in the average temperature of the Earth's air and oceans.
government	<i>noun</i>	system or order of a nation, state, or other political unit.
Great Plains	<i>noun</i>	grassland region of North America, between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River.
greenhouse gas	<i>noun</i>	gas in the atmosphere, such as carbon dioxide, methane, water vapor, and ozone, that absorbs solar heat reflected by the surface of the Earth, warming the atmosphere.

guerrilla	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with warfare conducted by organized groups of civilians, not soldiers or the military.
herbalist	<i>noun</i>	person who uses and dispenses herbs to treat medical ailments.
hide	<i>noun</i>	leather skin of an animal.
human geography	<i>noun</i>	the study of the way human communities and systems interact with their environment.
immigrant	<i>noun</i>	person who moves to a new country or region.
indigenous	<i>adjective</i>	native to or characteristic of a specific place.
interdependence	<i>noun</i>	people relying on each other for goods, services, and ideas.
irrigation	<i>noun</i>	watering land, usually for agriculture, by artificial means.
isthmus	<i>noun</i>	narrow strip of land connecting two larger land masses.
labor market	<i>noun</i>	workers, employees, and potential employees. The labor market is also the interaction between workers and their employers.
land bridge	<i>noun</i>	thin strip of land that connects two land masses and may be submerged by water periodically.
manufacturing sector	<i>noun</i>	part of the economy that produces goods for sale. Also called the secondary sector.
mestizo	<i>noun</i>	Latin American person with European and Native American ancestry.
Metis	<i>noun</i>	people and culture native to Canada, who trace their ancestry to European and indigenous heritage.
migrate	<i>verb</i>	to move from one place or activity to another.
natural disaster	<i>noun</i>	an event occurring naturally that has large-scale effects on the environment and people, such as a volcano, earthquake, or hurricane.
natural resource	<i>noun</i>	a material that humans take from the natural environment to survive, to satisfy their needs, or to trade with others.
navigator	<i>noun</i>	person who charts a course or path.
neighborhood	<i>noun</i>	an area within a larger city or town where people live and interact with one another.
nomadic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with a way of life lacking permanent settlement.
non-militarized	<i>adjective</i>	not controlled by the military.
North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)	<i>noun</i>	(1994) treaty between the United States, Canada, and Mexico that reduced tariffs and made trade easier between the countries.
overhunt	<i>verb</i>	to capture and kill enough animals to reduce their breeding population below sustainable levels.
persecute	<i>verb</i>	to harass or discriminate against, sometimes violently, on the basis of race, religion, or social and political beliefs.
physical geography	<i>noun</i>	study of the natural features and processes of the Earth.

political geography	<i>noun</i>	study of the spatial relationships that influence government or social policies.
political oppression	<i>noun</i>	preventing people from expressing their political opinion or participating in political life.
poverty	<i>noun</i>	status of having very little money or material goods.
Prairie Provinces	<i>noun</i>	Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Also called the Prairies.
prosper	<i>verb</i>	to be successful.
public welfare	<i>noun</i>	programs designed to benefit and support people who cannot support themselves economically.
refugee	<i>noun</i>	person who flees their home, usually due to natural disaster or political upheaval.
regulation	<i>noun</i>	rule or law.
reservation	<i>noun</i>	land in the U.S. reserved for the political, cultural, and physical use of Native American tribes and nations.
resource	<i>noun</i>	available supply of materials, goods, or services. Resources can be natural or human.
seasonal	<i>adjective</i>	likely to change with the seasons.
sophisticated	<i>adjective</i>	knowledgeable or complex.
sustainable tourism	<i>noun</i>	industry that seeks to make the lowest impact on the places and cultures visited, while contributing to local economies.
tariff	<i>noun</i>	tax imposed on imports or exports.
tax	<i>noun</i>	money or goods citizens provide to government in return for public services such as military protection.
terrorist	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the use of non-military violence and/or threats of violence to achieve or advocate political change.
trade	<i>noun</i>	buying, selling, or exchanging of goods and services.
weather pattern	<i>noun</i>	repeating or predictable changes in the Earth's atmosphere, such as winds, precipitation, and temperatures.

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