

SOUTH AMERICA: THE PHYSICAL LAND

CN: (1) Use a dark or bright color for the major rivers (A, C, E, F, and G). Use lighter colors for their tributaries (B, D, H).
(2) Color the highest peak in each west coast nation gray.
(3) Color the major land regions on the small map below.

MAJOR RIVER SYSTEMS

AMAZON_A
TRIBUTARIES_B

ORINOCO_C
TRIBUTARIES_D

RÍO DE LA PLATA_E

PARANÁ_F

PARAGUAY_F

URUGUAY_G

TRIBUTARIES_H

LAND REGIONS

ANDES MOUNTAINS_I

GUIANA HIGHLANDS_J

BRAZILIAN HIGHLANDS_K

CENTRAL PLAINS_L

LLANOS_L

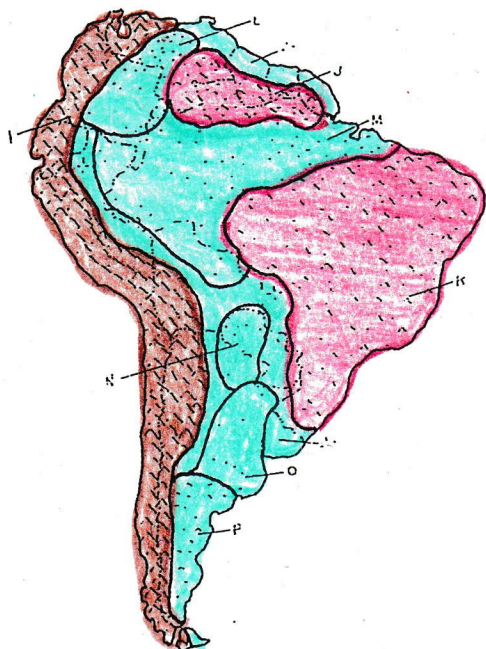
SELVAS_M

GRAN CHACO_N

PAMPAS_O

PATAGONIA_P

Separating the highlands in the east from the Andes in the west are the *Central Plains*. The *Llanos* are grassy cattle-grazing regions of Colombia and Venezuela. The *Selvas*, the rain forests of the Amazon River Basin, cover parts of Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia. The *Gran Chaco*, a generally dry and scrubby region of Bolivia, much of Paraguay, and part of Argentina, is known for the amazingly hard quebracho trees. The large, fertile, grassy *Pampas* region is Argentina's breadbasket. *Patagonia* is a cold, wind-swept land of deserts in southern Argentina.



South America shares a common geology with Africa, from which it separated nearly 200 million years ago (p. 2). Like North America, ice cream cone-shaped South America is broad in the north and narrow in the south. Both continents have three regions: ancient highlands in the east; younger and taller mountains in the west; and a wide plain in the center. In South America, the ancient highlands are the rugged Guiana Highlands in the northeast and the densely populated Brazilian Highlands in the eastern bulge. The Andes are the world's longest and second-tallest mountain range (after the Himalayas). They extend 4,500 mi. (7,200 km) down the western edge of the continent, from the Caribbean to Cape Horn. The upper elevations have an eternal snow cover, even at the Equator. Mt. Aconcagua (22,831 ft., 6,960 m) is the tallest of nearly 40 Andean peaks that are higher than North America's Mt. McKinley (20,320 ft., 6,195 m). The Andes are still growing as the eastward-moving Nazca tectonic plate grinds under the South American plate (p. 2). This is a region of geologic volatility, part of the Pacific Rim's "Ring of Fire" (p. 2).

Dominating the Central Plains is the mighty Amazon River Basin of rivers, streams, and rainforests. The river is the world's largest, and its length of 4,000 mi. (6,400 km) is second only to the Nile. From headwaters in the Peruvian Andes, the Amazon wends its way across the continent, transporting 20% of the world's total river water. The flow is so great that fresh water can be detected in the Atlantic 50 mi. (80 km) from the river's mouth. Parts of the river basin remain unexplored. Primitive tribes live there in total isolation. The Amazon was named after the mythical Greek female warriors by a European explorer who claimed he saw women fighting among the native tribes. The rainforest (*selva*), which is the world's largest, is being destroyed at an alarming rate. This forest has been called the "earth's lungs," but trees actually perform the reverse function: they take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen. Scientists are concerned that the elimination of vast regions of oxygen-producing vegetation, along with the smoke from the burning brush, will add to the "greenhouse effect." The Amazon Basin has over 100,000 species of plants and animals; many are unique to the region and are in danger of extinction because of habitat destruction. South America, in general, is rich in distinctively different plant and animal life because of its relative isolation. The continent's native animals tend to be small; the tapir, which is the largest, is no bigger than a pony.

The continent's two other important river systems are the Orinoco and the Río de la Plata. The Orinoco begins in the Guiana Highlands and makes a wide arc as it drains the grasslands of Colombia and Venezuela on its way to the Atlantic. The Río de la Plata system includes many rivers that provide essential transportation routes for Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. The Paraná, Paraguay, and Uruguay are the principal rivers of the system. They empty into the Atlantic through an estuary (an ocean inlet) called the Río de la Plata. Buenos Aires and Montevideo are located on opposite banks of this estuary. Brazil and Paraguay have completed the world's largest hydroelectric plant at the Itaipú Dam on the Paraná River. In the same region, separating Brazil and Argentina, are the Iguazú Falls, the world's largest. Depending on the seasonal flow of the Iguazú River, there are as many as 275 separate falls in this spectacular complex.

The continent's two major lakes are Maracaibo and Titicaca. The latter, the largest, is in the Andes between Peru and Bolivia. At a height of over 12,000 ft. (3,659 m), it is the world's highest navigable lake. It is also known for the sailboats that are woven from reeds growing along its shore. Even more remarkable are the floating islands woven from the same reeds. Houses sit on these islands.

On a narrow strip of land along the coast of Peru and northern Chile are some of the world's driest deserts. Parts of the 600 mi. (960 km) Atacama Desert in Chile have never had recorded rainfall. This aridity, unusual on an ocean shore, is due to the interaction of the cold waters of the Humboldt (Peru) Current (p. 59) and the Andes Mountains. Tropical ocean storms are cooled as they pass over the current and they release their moisture before reaching the coast. The Andes block storm from the east. Further up the coastline (beyond the range of the Humboldt Current) is one of the world's wettest regions, the Pacific coast of Colombia. South America does not have the temperature extremes of North America, although it does have a steamy equatorial region, Andean glaciers, hot deserts in Argentina, and the cold southern tip of Tierra del Fuego. Temperatures on the southeast coast are moderated by the warm Brazil Current (p. 59).

