NO PREP

# Latin America

## Physical Features and Cultural Diversity

**Includes:** Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

# Latin America: Physical Features and Cultural Diversity

### Geography and Physical Features

Latin America stretches from the deserts of northern Mexico to the icy landscapes of southern Chile and Argentina. It includes both South America and parts of Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico. This vast region contains some of the world's most striking natural features. The Andes Mountains, the longest continental mountain range in the world, run along the western edge of South America. To the east lies the Amazon Basin, home to the world's largest tropical rainforest and the mighty Amazon River, which carries more water than any other river on Earth. Latin America's geography is also shaped by natural hazards. The region lies along the Ring of Fire, making it prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Countries like Chile,

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## Cultural Diversity and History

Latin America's culture is deeply influenced by its Indigenous, European, and African roots. Before European colonization, powerful civilizations like the Aztec, Maya, and Inca built advanced cities, agricultural systems, and traditions that still impact the region today. Spanish and Portuguese colonization introduced new languages, religions, and political systems. As a result, most of Latin America speaks Spanish or Portuguese, and Roman Catholicism remains the dominant religion. The arrival of enslaved Africans added another layer of cultural diversity. African traditions

blended with Indigenous and European influences, shaping music, food, and festivals. Today, Latin America is famous for its rich cultural life—salsa, samba, tango, and mariachi music are celebrated worldwide. At the same time, the region struggles with issues of inequality and cultural tension. Indigenous groups continue to fight for land rights and recognition, while urban areas face rapid growth and economic challenges. Latin America's cultural diversity is both its strength and its ongoing challenge, shaping how people see themselves and their societies.

**Economic Development and Challenges**

Latin America has abundant natural resources, but its economies have faced struggles throughout history. Countries like Venezuela and Mexico rely heavily on oil exports, while Chile and Peru are major producers of copper and silver. Brazil, with its vast farmland, exports soybeans, coffee, and beef, making it an agricultural powerhouse. Yet despite these resources, the region has often faced economic inequality. Wealth is concentrated among small elites, while large populations remain in poverty. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen efforts to expand industry and trade. Many Latin American countries are members of trade organizations such as MERCOSUR and have developed stronger ties to global markets. However, corruption, political instability, and reliance on exports continue to slow progress. Migration also plays a key role in the economy—millions of Latin Americans move within the region or to North America seeking better opportunities. Economic success is possible, but it remains uneven, highlighting the challenges of balancing growth with fairness.

**Conclusion: Latin America's Global Role**

Latin America is a region of contrasts—rich in cultural traditions, blessed with natural resources, but challenged by inequality and environmental threats. Its geography and history have created a unique identity that influences not only its own people but also the global community. From the Amazon's role in climate regulation to its cultural exports of music and food, Latin America continues to shape the modern world.

**Key Information: Table: Latin America at a Glance**

| Feature | Location | Importance |
|---|---|---|
| Andes Mountains | Western South America | Longest continental mountain range |
| Amazon Basin | Brazil and surrounding nations | Largest tropical rainforest |
| Caribbean Islands | Caribbean Sea | Tropical climate, tourism economies |
| MERCOSUR | Regional trade group | Promotes trade among members |
| Aztec, Maya, Inca | Mexico & South America | Advanced civilizations before colonization |

**Case Study Excerpt: The Amazon Rainforest – A Global Resource Under Threat**

**The Amazon Rainforest, often called the "lungs of the Earth," spans over nine countries in South America, with the largest portion in Brazil. It plays a major role in absorbing carbon dioxide and regulating regional rainfall, and it holds immense biodiversity, from jaguars and pink river dolphins to thousands of plant species found nowhere else. Indigenous groups have lived in the Amazon for thousands of years, relying on its resources while maintaining sustainable practices. In recent decades, however, the Amazon has faced massive deforestation. Farmers clear land for cattle ranching and soy production, while illegal logging strips valuable trees. Mining for gold and other minerals has further damaged ecosystems and polluted rivers. These activities threaten not only wildlife but also Indigenous communities who are displaced from their ancestral lands. The destruction of the Amazon also contributes to climate change, as trees that once absorbed carbon dioxide are cut down. Scientists warn that continued deforestation could push the rainforest past a tipping point, transforming large areas into dry savanna. The future of the Amazon is uncertain. Governments, conservation groups, and Indigenous leaders debate how to balance economic development with environmental sustainability. For many, the Amazon is not just a Latin American treasure—it is a global necessity for combating climate change and protecting biodiversity.**

1. Why is the Amazon considered important for both Latin America and the world?

2. How do economic activities like farming and mining conflict with environmental protection in the Amazon?

**Multiple Choice**

1. Which river carries more water than any other on Earth?

    a) Mississippi

    b) Amazon

    c) Yangtze

    d) Nile

2. Which civilizations were major influences in Latin America before European colonization?

    a) Mongols and Persians

    b) Aztec, Maya, and Inca

    c) Celts and Vikings

    d) Greeks and Romans

3. What is one major threat to the Amazon Rainforest today?

    a) Overfishing in its rivers

    b) Urbanization of European cities

    c) Deforestation from logging and farming

    d) Desertification from lack of rainfall

**Matching**

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| 1. ___ Andes Mountains | A) Advanced civilizations before colonization |
| 2. ___ Amazon Basin | B) Regional trade group |
| 3. ___ Caribbean Islands | C) Mountain range in South America |
| 4. ___ MERCOSUR | D) Tropical islands with tourism-based economies |
| 5. ___ Aztec, Maya, Inca | E) Tropical rainforest with global impact |

**Fill-in-the-Blank**

1. The _____ is often called the "lungs of the Earth."

2. Most Latin American countries speak _____ or Portuguese.

3. Venezuela's economy has relied heavily on _____ exports.

**Short Answer**

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How has colonization shaped Latin America's languages and religions?

_____

_____

_____

2. Why does economic inequality remain a major challenge in Latin America?

_____

_____

_____

3. What role does the Amazon play in regulating Earth's climate?

_____

_____

_____