

North America Info Sheet

North America is the third largest continent after Asia and Africa. It lies between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. North America includes the Greenland ice sheet and the islands of northern Canada. It also incorporates the Caribbean. North America is joined to South America by a narrow strip of land.

North America has a great diversity of landscapes. The Rocky Mountains are one of the main geographical features. The highest peaks are over 6,000 metres high and the mountain ranges extend 5,000km from Alaska to Mexico. The Great Plains, the Great Lakes and the Mississippi river lie to the east of the Rockies. There are deserts in Mexico and the southern United States. Many northern areas are covered by forests and tundra. The Caribbean islands form a distinct region in the south.

Canada, the USA and Mexico are by far the largest countries in North America but there are also many much smaller nations and island states. Across the continent there is a mixture of peoples. From the sixteenth century onwards, the native population was overwhelmed by European colonisation which followed the voyages of exploration. The historical influence of Spain, France and England is reflected in the languages spoken in North America today. Over ten million slaves were also brought from Africa to work on the sugar and cotton plantations, forming a distinctive ethnic group.

North America has some of the world's largest cities, including Mexico City, Los Angeles and New York. The conurbations of east and west coasts of the USA are especially densely populated. By contrast there are vast open areas, especially in the Rocky Mountains, northern Canada and Greenland. Farming, industry and economic activity have had a considerable impact on the natural environment. As a major polluter and world power, the USA has a particularly important role to play in mitigating global climate change.

