Physical Geography

If YOU lived there...
You live in Caracas, Venezuela, but this is your first visit to the great Orinoco River. You’ve heard about the fierce creatures that live in the river, so you think your guide is kidding when he says he’s going to catch a piranha. You’re expecting a monster and are surprised when he pulls up a small orange fish. It has many sharp teeth, but it’s only seven inches long!

What other animals might you see in the region?

The Big Idea
Caribbean South America is a region with diverse physical features, wildlife, climates, and resources.

BUILDING BACKGROUND The narrow Isthmus of Panama joins the continent of South America at its northwestern corner, the country of Colombia. Like the countries of Central America, the five countries in Caribbean South America border the Caribbean Sea. They all vary in landscape, climate, and culture and have large rivers and rugged mountains.

Physical Features and Wildlife
If you were traveling through the region of Caribbean South America, you might see the world’s highest waterfall, South America’s largest lake, and even the world’s largest rodent! As you can see on the map, the geography of this region includes rugged mountains, highlands, and plains drained by huge river systems.

Mountains and Highlands
The highest point in the region is in Colombia, a country larger than California and Texas combined. On the western side of Colombia the Andes (AN-deez) reach 18,000 feet (5,490 m). The Andes form a cordillera (kawr-duhl-ver-uh), a mountain system made up of roughly parallel ranges. Some of the Andes’ snowcapped peaks are active volcanoes. Eruptions and earthquakes shake these mountains frequently.
Lying on the Caribbean coast, Venezuela is located in the middle of the other countries in the region. Venezuela’s highest elevation is in the Guiana Highlands, which stretch into Guyana and Suriname. For millions of years, wind and rain have eroded these highlands’ plateaus. However, some of the steep-sided plateaus are capped by sandstone layers that have resisted erosion. These unusual flat-topped formations are sometimes called tepuis (tay-PWEEZ). The tepuis create a dramatic landscape as they rise about 3,000 to 6,000 feet (900 to 1,800 m) above the surrounding plains.

Plains, Rivers, and Wildlife
As you look at the map above, notice how much the elevation drops between the highlands and the Andes. This region of plains is known as the Llanos (YAH-nohs). The Llanos is mostly grassland with few trees. At a low elevation and not much vegetation, these plains flood easily.
Flowing for about 1,600 miles (2,575 km), the **Orinoco** (ohr-ee-noh-koh) River is the region's longest river. Snaking its way through Venezuela to the Atlantic Ocean, the Orinoco and its tributaries drain the plains and highlands. Two other important rivers, the Cauca and the Magdalena, drain the Andean region.

Caribbean South America is home to some remarkable wildlife. For example, hundreds of bird species, meat-eating fish called piranhas, and crocodiles live in or around the Orinoco River. Colombia has one of the world's highest concentrations of plant and animal species. The country's wildlife includes jaguars, ocelots, and several species of monkeys.

**Reading Check** Summarizing What are the region's major physical features?
Climate and Vegetation

Caribbean South America's location near the equator means that most of the region has warm temperatures year-round. However, temperatures do vary with elevation. For example, in the Andes, as you go up in elevation, the temperature can drop rapidly—about four degrees Fahrenheit every 1,000 feet (305 m).

In contrast, the vast, flat landscape of the Llanos region has a tropical savanna climate. Here, both the wet and dry seasons provide favorable conditions for grasslands to grow.

Rain forests, another type of landscape, thrive in the humid tropical climate of southern Colombia. This area is a part of the Amazon Basin. Here, rain falls throughout the year, watering the forest's huge trees. These trees form a canopy where the vegetation is so dense that sunlight barely shines through to the jungle floor.

Reading Check  Analyzing What causes the region's temperatures to vary?

Resources

Good soil and moderate climates help make most of Caribbean South America a rich agricultural region. Major crops include rice, coffee, bananas, and sugarcane.

In addition, the region has other valuable resources, such as oil, iron ore, and coal. Both Venezuela and Colombia have large oil-rich areas. Forests throughout the region provide timber. While the seas provide plentiful fish and shrimp, the region's major rivers are used to generate hydroelectric power.

Reading Check  Summarizing How do geographic factors affect economic activities in Caribbean South America?

Summary and Preview

In this section you learned that the physical geography of Caribbean South America includes mountains, highlands, plains, and rivers. The region's location near the equator and its elevation affect the region's climate. In the next section you will learn about Colombia's history, people, and economy. You will also learn about the challenges Colombia is facing today, which include a civil war.

Section 1 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and Places

1. a. Recall Where are the Andes located?
   b. Explain How are the rock formations called tepuis unusual?
   c. Elaborate Why do the Llanos in Colombia and Venezuela flood easily?

2. a. Describe In the Andes, how does the temperature change with elevation?
   b. Make Inferences How does the region's location near the equator affect its climate?

3. a. Identify What is a major resource in both Venezuela and Colombia?
   b. Explain Which resource provides hydroelectric power?

Critical Thinking

4. Categorizing Use your notes to identify four types of physical features in the region. Write each type in one of the small circles of the diagram.

Focus on Writing

5. Describing Physical Geography Take notes about the physical features, wildlife, climate, vegetation, and resources of the region. After you decide which country you are living in, collect more details about it.