

The Pacific Islands

SECTION

2

If YOU lived there...

You live on a small island in the South Pacific. For many years, the people on your island have made their living by fishing. Now, however, a European company has expressed interest in building an airport and a luxury hotel on your island. It hopes that tourists will be drawn by the island's dazzling beaches and tropical climate. The company's leaders want your permission before they build.

Will you give them permission? Why or why not?

BUILDING BACKGROUND Thousands of islands are scattered across the Pacific Ocean. Many of these islands are tiny and have few mineral resources. Among the resources they do have are pleasant climates and scenic landscapes. As a result, many Pacific islands have become popular tourist destinations.

Physical Geography

The Pacific Ocean covers more than one-third of Earth's surface. Scattered throughout this ocean are thousands of islands with similar physical features, climates, and resources.

Island Regions

We divide the Pacific Islands into three regions—Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia—based on their culture and geography. **Micronesia**, which means “tiny islands,” is located just east of the Philippines. Some 2,000 small islands make up this region. South of Micronesia is **Melanesia**, which stretches from New Guinea in the west to Fiji in the east. Melanesia is the most heavily populated Pacific Island region. The largest region is **Polynesia**, which means “many islands.” Among Polynesia's many islands are Tonga, Samoa, and the Hawaiian Islands.

Physical Features

The Pacific Islands differ greatly. Some islands, like New Guinea (GI-nee), cover thousands of square miles. Other islands are tiny. For example, Nauru covers only 8 square miles (21 square km).

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Unique physical features, tropical climates, and limited resources shape the physical geography of the Pacific Islands.
2. Native customs and contact with the western world have influenced the history and culture of the Pacific Islands.
3. Pacific Islanders today are working to improve their economies and protect the environment.

The Big Idea

The Pacific islands have tropical climates, rich cultures, and unique challenges.

Key Terms and Places

Micronesia, p. 652

Melanesia, p. 653

Polynesia, p. 653

atoll, p. 654

territory, p. 655

TAKING NOTES

As you read, use a diagram like this one to take notes on the Pacific Islands.



Geographers classify the islands of the Pacific as either high islands or low islands. High islands tend to be mountainous and rocky. Most high islands are volcanic islands. They were formed when volcanic mountains grew from the ocean floor and reached the surface. The islands of Tahiti

and Hawaii in Polynesia are examples of high islands. Other high islands, such as New Guinea, are formed from continental rock rather than volcanoes. For example, the country of Papua (PA-pyoooh-wuh) New Guinea, located on the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, has rocky mountains that rise above 13,000 feet (3,960 m).

Low islands are typically much smaller than high islands. Most barely rise above sea level. Many low islands are atolls. An **atoll** is a small, ring-shaped coral island that surrounds a lagoon. Wake Island, west of the Hawaiian Islands, is an example of an atoll. Wake Island rises only 21 feet (6.4 m) above sea level and covers only 2.5 square miles (6.5 square km).

Climate and Resources

All but two of the Pacific Island countries lie in the tropics. As a result, most islands have a humid tropical climate. Rain falls all year and temperatures are warm. Tropical savanna climates with rainy and dry seasons exist in a few places, such as New Caledonia. The mountains of New Guinea are home to a cool highland climate.

Resources in the Pacific Islands vary widely. Most low islands have thin soils and little vegetation. They have few trees other than the coconut palm. In addition, low islands have few mineral or energy resources. Partly because of these conditions, low islands have small populations.

In contrast to low islands, the Pacific's high islands have many natural resources. Volcanic soils provide fertile farmland and dense forests. Farms produce crops such as coffee, cocoa, bananas, and sugarcane. Some high islands also have many mineral resources. Papua New Guinea, for example, exports gold, copper, and oil.

READING CHECK Contrasting How do the Pacific's low islands differ from high islands?

High and Low Islands

Many high islands, like the island of Hawaii, often have mountainous terrain, rich soils, and dense rain forests. Many low islands, like this small island in the Society Islands chain, are formed from coral reefs. Because most low islands have poor soils, agriculture is limited.



The Formation of an Atoll

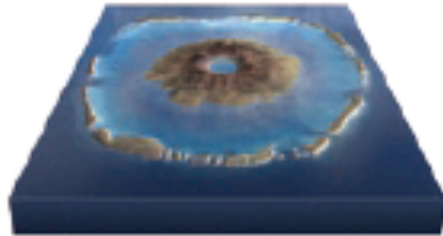
The Pacific Islands are home to many atolls, or small coral islands that surround shallow lagoons. Coral reefs are formed from the skeletons of many tiny sea animals. When a coral reef forms on the edges of a volcanic island, it often forms a barrier reef around the island.

As the volcanic island sinks, the coral remains. Sand and other debris gradually collects on the reef's surface, raising the land above sea level. Eventually, all that remains is an atoll.

Sequencing Describe the process in which atolls form.

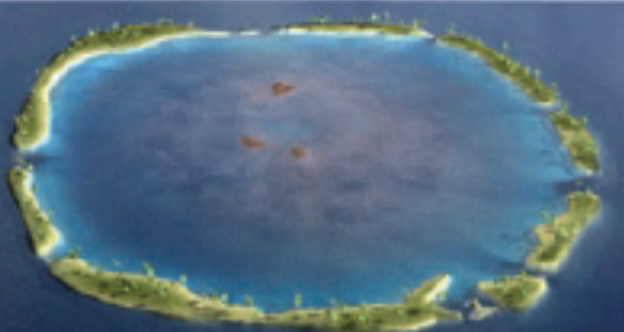


Coral reefs will sometimes form along the edges of a volcanic island, creating a ring around the island.



As the island sinks into the ocean floor, the coral reef grows upward and forms an offshore barrier reef.

Over time, sand collects on the surface of the reef, allowing grasses and shrubs to grow. When the island is submerged, the reef forms an atoll, or a ring of coral islands surrounding a lagoon.



History and Culture

The Pacific Islands were one of the last places settled by humans. Because of their isolation from other civilizations, the islands have a unique history and culture.

Early History

Scholars believe that people began settling the Pacific Islands at least 35,000 years ago. The large islands of Melanesia were the first to be settled. Over time, people spread to the islands of Micronesia and Polynesia.

Europeans first encountered the Pacific Islands in the 1500s. Two centuries later, British captain James Cook explored all the main Pacific Island regions. By the late 1800s European powers such as Spain, Great Britain, and France controlled most of the Pacific Islands.

Modern History

By the early 1900s, other countries were entering the Pacific as well. In 1898 the United States defeated Spain in the Spanish-American War. As a result, Guam became a U.S. territory. **A territory is an area that is under the authority of another government.** Japan also expanded its empire into the Pacific Ocean in the early 1900s. In World War II, the Pacific Islands were the scene of many tough battles between Allied and Japanese forces. After Japan's defeat in 1945, the United Nations placed some islands under the control of the United States and other Allies.

In the last half of the 1900s many Pacific Islands gained their independence. However, several countries—including the United States, France, and New Zealand—still have territories in the Pacific Islands.



Geography Skills

Place The Pacific Islands consist of three major island regions—Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia.

1. **Use the Map** Approximately how many miles separate the islands of Palau and French Polynesia?
2. **Contrast** Based on the map, how do the Melanesian islands differ from those of French Polynesia?

Culture

A variety of cultures thrive throughout the Pacific Islands. Some culture traits, such as fishing, are common throughout the entire region. Others are only found on a specific island or island chain.

People Close to 9 million people live in the Pacific Islands today. Most Pacific Islanders are descendants of the region's original settlers. However, the population of the Pacific Islands also includes large numbers of ethnic Europeans and Asians, particularly Indians and Chinese. Many ethnic Asians are descended from people brought to the islands to work on colonial

plantations. On the Melanesian island of Fiji, for example, Indians make up nearly half of the population.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the people of the Pacific Islands practiced hundreds of different religions. Today most Pacific Islanders are Christian. In Melanesia, however, some people continue to practice traditional local religions.

Traditions Although modern culture exists throughout the Pacific Islands, many people continue to practice traditional customs. In parts of Polynesia, for example, people still construct their homes from bamboo and palm leaves. Many Pacific Islanders today continue to live in ancient villages, practice customary art styles, and hold ceremonies that feature traditional costumes and dances.

READING CHECK Making Inferences In what ways have the Pacific Islands been influenced by contact with westerners?

The Pacific Islands Today

Many people imagine sunny beaches and tourists when they think of the Pacific Islands today. Despite the region's healthy tourism industry, however, Pacific Island countries face important challenges.

The countries of the Pacific Islands have developing economies. Fishing, tourism, and agriculture are key industries. Some countries, particularly Papua New Guinea, export minerals and timber. The region's isolation from other countries, however, hinders its ability to trade.

The environment is an important concern in the Pacific Islands. The Pacific Islands were used for nuclear testing grounds from the 1940s to the 1990s. Many people fear that one effect of these tests may be health problems for people in the region. Global warming also concerns Pacific Islanders. Some researchers believe that rising temperatures may cause polar ice to melt. The rise in ocean levels would threaten low-lying Pacific Islands.

READING CHECK Summarizing What are some challenges Pacific Islanders face today?



Villagers on Tanna Island in Vanuatu perform a traditional dance.

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW The Pacific Islands are one of the most isolated regions in the world. As a result, unique cultures and challenges exist in the region. In the next section you will learn about another isolated part of the globe—Antarctica.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY
effect the results of an action or decision

Section 2 Assessment

go.hrw.com
Online Quiz
KEYWORD: SK7 HP25

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and Places

- a. **Describe** Into what regions are the Pacific Islands divided?
b. **Draw Conclusions** Why might high islands have larger populations than low islands?
- a. **Define** What is a territory?
b. **Make Inferences** Why did other countries seek to control the Pacific Islands?
c. **Elaborate** Why do you think that many Pacific Islanders continue to practice traditional customs?
- a. **Recall** What economic resources are available to the Pacific Islands?
b. **Predict** How might the Pacific Islands be affected by global warming in the future?

Critical Thinking

- Finding Main Ideas** Draw a chart like the one shown. Using your notes, identify the main idea of each topic and write a sentence for each.

Physical Geography	History	Culture	Issues Today

FOCUS ON WRITING

- Telling about the Resources of the Pacific** Add to your list by noting the natural resources of the Pacific Islands. Which resources will you describe in your brochure? How might you describe them?