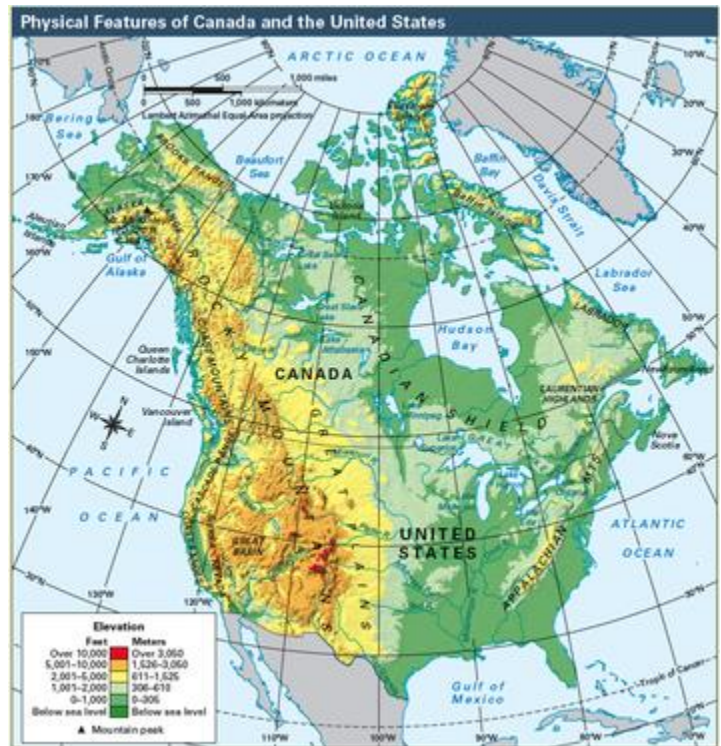


1. Introducing the Region: Physical Geography

Canada and the United States make up the **region** that covers most of North America. This region is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west. The Arctic Ocean lies to the north of this region. The Gulf of Mexico lies to the south. North America is the third largest continent in the world.



This large region contains two sub-regions. Canada and Alaska make up the northern part. The 48 continental United States make up the southern part. West of the Great Lakes, the two sub-regions are separated by the 49th parallel of latitude. East of the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence River separates the two sub-regions.



2. Physical Features

If you look at a physical map of this region, you see mountains running along both sides, with a large, flat area in the center. This flat area runs from the Arctic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. It is made up of **shield** and plains.

The term *shield* refers to the large core of very old rock that lies at the base of each continent. In North America, this rock core was exposed thousands of years ago. During the ice ages, **glaciers** scraped across the land, taking the soil with them. They left just a thin layer of soil in eastern and central Canada.



Plains are flat or gently rolling areas of land. Much of the soil that glaciers scraped from the Canadian Shield ended up on the plains of Canada and the United States.

Canada and Alaska

The Canadian Shield covers almost half of Canada. The rest of this sub-region contains islands, lakes, plains, and mountains.

The glaciers that scraped the shield also dug the huge holes that became the Great Lakes. These lakes lie between Canada and the United States. They are the world's largest group of **freshwater** lakes. The St. Lawrence River connects the Great Lakes to the ocean.

To the far north are many smaller lakes and Hudson Bay. The region extends past the Arctic Circle and ends with a scattering of islands. The largest is named Baffin Island.

In the Atlantic Ocean, off the southeast coast of Newfoundland, lie the Grand Banks. The ocean is very shallow here.

Far to the west, in the Alaska Range, is the highest peak in North America. Mount McKinley rises 20,320 feet above sea level.

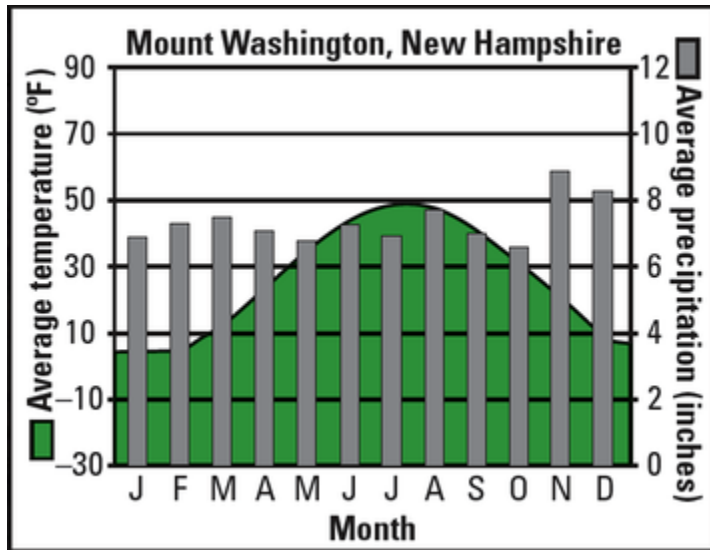
Continental United States

Two major mountain ranges run through the continental United States. In the east, the Appalachians are a gentle range of rounded peaks and deep valleys. In the west, the Rocky Mountains jut up into jagged, snowcapped peaks. The Rockies reach all the way from Alaska to New Mexico.

Between these two ranges, wide plains stretch across the middle of the continent. This vast, mostly flat region extends about 2,500 miles north and south. From the Rockies, the dry and treeless Great Plains slope down to the central lowlands.

A large system of rivers drains most of the plains between the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians. These rivers all flow into the muddy Mississippi River. The Mississippi empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

3. Climate



Climate varies widely across this large region, which reaches from the chilly Arctic to the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

The northern parts of this landmass fall in **tundra** and **subarctic** climate zones. In subarctic climates, winters are very long, cold, and snowy. Summers are very short. They may be cool and rainy.

The tundra climate zone is even more severe. Here it is cold all year, even in summer. Winter temperatures are usually well below 0°F. In summer, the high temperatures may not be far above freezing (32°F). Areas with tundra climate get very little rain or snow. Beneath the surface, the ground is always frozen.

These colder climates occur in places that don't get a lot of direct sunlight. The sun's rays are most direct at the equator. In general, the farther a region is from the equator, the colder the climate will be. Since the northern part of this region is very far from the equator, it is very cold.

Canada and Alaska

Most of Canada and Alaska have either a tundra or a subarctic climate. But the climate warms up as you move farther south. The area closest to the continental United States enjoys a mostly **humid continental** climate. Winters are still freezing cold, but summers can be hot and steamy.

Nearly all of Canada and Alaska have heavy snows in the winter. But on the west coast of British Columbia, the **marine west coast** climate brings more rain than snow. There, and in the southern part of Canada, summers are warmer and drier.

Continental United States

No part of the continental United States has a tundra or subarctic climate. The climate here can vary greatly, depending on where you are. One state, California, has as many as five different climate zones.

The southern part of the United States is generally warm year-round. The Southeast has a **humid subtropical** climate, influenced by the Gulf of Mexico. Hot, rainy summers follow mild winters that see some rain. The climate of Florida's southern tip is **tropical wet and dry**. There, it is hot all year, with both rainy and dry seasons.

Arid and **semiarid** climates are common in the Southwest. This area is hot and dry in the summer and pleasant in the winter, with very little rain. Many older people from colder climates choose to retire in the Southwest.

The rest of the western United States has a variety of climates. The Sierra Nevada and Rocky mountains have a **highlands** climate. Along the northern Pacific Coast, a marine west coast climate brings mild winters and lots of rain.

Most of the Midwest and Northeast have a humid continental climate. People here enjoy four distinct seasons. Summers are quite warm and winters are cold, often with snow and ice storms.

4. Vegetation

Just as the climate varies across Canada and the United States, so does the vegetation.

One widespread **vegetation zone** in this region is **temperate grassland**. Mainly short and tall grasses grow in temperate grasslands. Few trees grow in this zone because there is not enough rain. The Great Plains area of the United States and Canada is one of the world's largest temperate grasslands. This area combines a long growing season with fertile soil. As a result, the Great Plains provide very productive farmland.

Another special vegetation zone in this region is **tundra**. This vegetation zone shares a name with the tundra climate zone, where it is cold year-round. The tundra vegetation zone is like a very cold **desert**. Few large plants can grow here.

Like temperate grasslands, the tundra is treeless. Because the ground is frozen, trees cannot send their roots down into the soil. Only very low grasses, mosses, and scrub cover the ground during the short summer. They provide food for the grazing animals that live on the tundra.

Canada and Alaska

The tundra spreads across the far northern islands and coasts of Canada. Much of Alaska's land is tundra as well. In the **ice cap** on Alaska's highest peaks and glaciers, no plant life grows at all. Most of Canada and the rest of Alaska are covered in **coniferous forests**, filled with trees such as cedar, fir, pine, and spruce. The needle-like leaves of these trees stay green all year.

The warmer climate in southeastern Canada supports **mixed forest**. Here you find a mix of both coniferous and deciduous trees. Deciduous trees, such as oak, elm, and birch, have broad leaves that they shed each fall. The south-central part of Canada is temperate grassland.

Continental United States

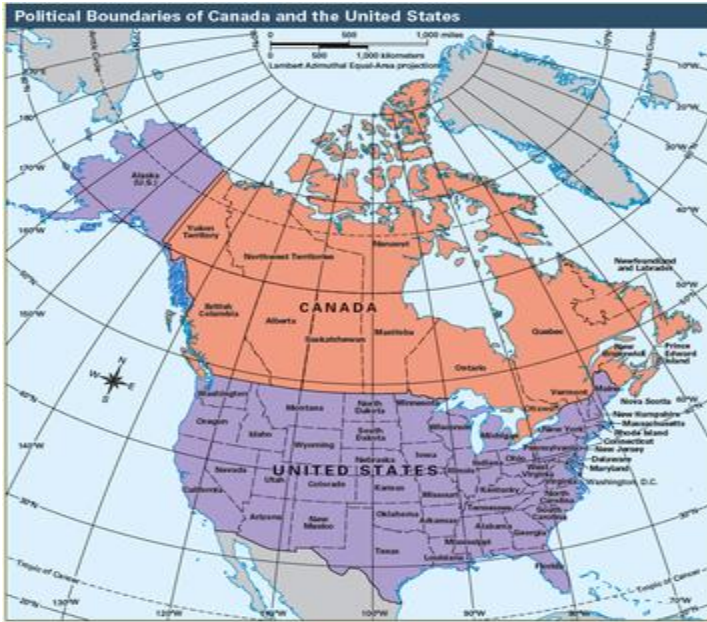
The vegetation of the continental United States ranges from tropical palms to desert sagebrush. There are thick pine forests in the West, grasses on the central plains, and forested swamps in the South.

Spreading up and down the East Coast are forests of all types—coniferous, deciduous, and mixed. The extreme Southeast—along the Gulf Coast and in Florida's Everglades—is home to **tropical grasslands**. The tough saw-grass and scattered trees in the Everglades are adapted to the tropical wet and dry climate.

Across the central part of the United States is a wide band of temperate grassland. This area was once thick with prairie grasses. However, much of the land has been plowed for farming. It is now covered with fields of corn, wheat, and other crops.

In the West, coniferous forests blanket the mountains. **Desert scrub** grows throughout the deserts and canyons of the Southwest and Great Basin. Along the California coast, **chaparral** dots the Coast Ranges.

5. Human Geography



All of the other regions of the world are made up of many countries. However, this region is made up of just two large countries: Canada and the United States. In land area, Canada is the second largest country in the world. Yet its population is quite small for its size. The United States is almost as large as Canada in land area. But the U.S. population is nine times the size of Canada's.

The two countries share a common cultural background. Most of the people are English-speaking, although Canada officially uses French as well. Both countries have native populations. Both countries were colonized by settlers from Europe about 500 years ago. In later years, immigration from all parts of the world has enriched the two countries with a wide variety of cultures.

6. History

The histories of Canada and the United States reveal why these countries are so similar.

Early Times

Scholars believe that North American history began when bands of hunters migrated to Alaska from Asia. This happened more than 10,000 years ago. Over time, these first bands settled throughout the region. As they adapted to their environment, each group developed its own culture.

The Inuit, or Eskimo, people stayed in the far north. They hunted Arctic animals for food and clothing. Other groups settled along the west coast of the continent. Fish and trees were plentiful there and provided food, clothing, and shelter. Many groups settled in the central and eastern parts of the region. A group called the Anasazi built cliff houses in the southwestern United States.

The Colonial Period

Europeans began coming to North America in the 1500s. The French and British set up colonies along the eastern coast. The Spanish colonized Florida, Texas, and California.

The American colonies revolted against Britain in 1775. A successful war for independence followed. In 1783, the United States became an independent country.

Yet there was not freedom for everyone. Millions of slaves lived in the United States. The country split over the question of slavery. It fought a **civil war** between 1861 and 1865. In 1865, slavery ended in the United States.

Canada was first colonized by the French. After a war, France turned Canada over to Great Britain in 1763. French culture still remains strong in Canada. Many Canadians speak French as their first language.

In 1867, Canadians won the right to govern themselves. Yet Canada still was part of the British Empire.

The Modern Era

In the twentieth century, Canada and the United States formed a strong bond. Canada gained its independence from Great Britain in 1931. People on both sides of the U.S.– Canadian border welcomed this event.

In 1939, war broke out in Europe. War was also raging in Asia. This global conflict is known as World War II. The United States and Canada worked closely together to end this war. Since then, they have continued to work together for world peace.

Today Canada and the United States are closely linked by trade. Canadians buy many products that are made or grown in the United States. Americans also buy many Canadian products. In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect. NAFTA made trade between the two countries easier. This trade pact allows most goods to move freely among Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

7. Population

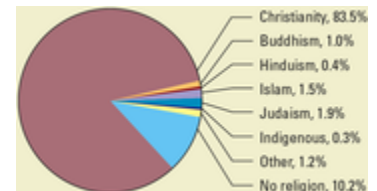
More than 337 million people altogether live in Canada and the United States. This is about 6 percent of the world's population. The population of this region is growing very slowly compared with other parts of the world.



Some parts of this region are almost empty. The western deserts are too dry, and the far north is too cold for settlement. Very few people live in these places. Northern Canada is thinly settled, with a **population density** as low as one person per 43 square miles.

Most Canadians live close to the U.S. border. Toronto is the largest **urban** area in Canada. Throughout the region people tend to cluster in or near cities, where more jobs can be found.

Most people in Canada and the United States are Christian. Almost one fourth of these are Roman Catholics. Islam is the fastest growing religion here. Other faiths include Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. One out of 10 people have no religion.



8. Economic Activity



Canada and the United States are rich in many kinds of resources. One of these is good farmland. As a result, **commercial farming** is an important **economic activity** in this region.

Commercial farming is the growing of farm products for sale to others. Wheat, for example, is a commercial crop. It is grown widely in the U.S. Midwest and in the prairie provinces of Canada—Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. The farmers of this region sell their crops around the world. They produce about half of the world's grain exports. From California and Florida, farmers ship fruits and vegetables. They help make this region the

world's leading food exporter.

Forestry is also important to this region. Forestry is the planting, growing, and harvesting of trees. North America was once covered with thick forests. Over time, many trees were cut down for fuel and lumber. In southern Canada and in several corners of the United States, logging is still a big industry.

Resources

Canada and the United States also have a wealth of mineral resources. Oil and coal, used for energy, are the most important. Texas, Alaska, and Alberta have thriving oil industries. Coal is plentiful in the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains. It is also mined in the river valleys of the central United States.

Mines in Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia produce gold, nickel, and copper. In the western United States, New Mexico has large reserves of uranium. Arizona is rich in copper deposits.

Land Use

Much of this region is used for raising livestock. Cattle graze widely across the western range. Sheep ranches are also common. Trade and manufacturing are strong in the urban centers of this region. In the United States, manufacturing plays an especially big role in the Midwest and Northeast. Factories there produce cars, steel, plastics, glass, and textiles.

Summary

Canada and the United States make up the region that covers most of North America. Canada and Alaska make up the northern part of this region. The continental United States make up the southern part. The two parts of this region differ in physical features, climate, vegetation, population density, and economic activity. However, the cultural backgrounds of Canada and the United States are very similar. Europeans settled in both countries in the 1500s. Today, trade creates a strong bond between the two countries.