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Introduction
This book provides information on some of the key environmental, cultural, economic, and political issues that face North America. To provide a larger context for understanding the patterns and processes shaping people and places in North America today, we also include a discussion of the historical processes that have helped to shape each region in North America in the chapters that follow. Because of the physical, economic, and cultural linkages of the United States and Canada to the Mexican borderlands, along with their environmental and physical connections to the island of Greenland, we include information on the United States–Mexico borderlands region and Greenland. In today’s rapidly globalizing world, with the ever-increasing economic and cultural linkages among places in North America, we believe that it is essential to extend our discussion where possible to include every corner of this vast continent as shown on the map in Figure 1.1.

**Why Study North America?**

North America is huge! The two largest countries, Canada and the United States, cover more than 7.5 million square miles (20 million square kilometers). North America is the world’s third largest continent. Canada now has jurisdiction over almost 6.7 percent of the world’s land area and the United States controls nearly 6.4 percent. The territorial and political control of so much of the inhabited (and potentially inhabited) portion of Earth by only two governments makes the continent of particular importance. Added to the size dimension of these two nations is the critical importance of the very large island of Greenland. Not only is it the world’s largest island (at $2\times\frac{1}{2}$ times the size of the second largest island, New Guinea, and 52 times the size of Denmark), it is also the most northern country on Earth. Similarly, at the southern edges of the United States border, the Mexican borderlands are also critical to our story of North America. Both of these parts of the continent are important not only because of their large size, close relationship, and proximity to Canada and the United States but also because their peoples, places, and global economic connections make them distinct and fascinating places for geographic study in their own right.

Politically, all North Americans share a colonial past with European countries and a related aboriginal heritage. After thousands of years of settlement by native peoples who first came to the continent between 50,000 and 25,000 years ago, the political structure and cultural and economic foundation of post-colonial America was primarily dominated by Great Britain; Canada by the British and French; Greenland by Denmark; the southwestern United States and Mexico by Spain. Each of these colonial foundations was imposed upon the cultures and economies of groups of indigenous peoples already in place.

Central to understanding the current politics and socioeconomic and cultural geographies of each of these nation-states are the different ways that each emerged from its colonial past. In the United States, for example, a bloody Revolutionary War launched the nation’s independence from England. Canada, in contrast, remained loyal to Britain for a longer period, until the Dominion of Canada was ratified peacefully in 1867 and Canada began self-rule with a British parliamentary-style democracy. The last of the continent’s political regions to break with its colonial past was Greenland. In a nonviolent agreement, this island nation severed its colonial relationship with Denmark in 1979 when it was granted home rule (although the queen of Denmark remains Greenland’s head of state). The head of government is a prime minister, who is usually the majority leader of parliament.

Each of these political regions also has unique but interconnected demographic and cultural characteristics. Although an increasing number of Canadians, Americans, Europeans, and people from other parts of the world have immigrated to Greenland during the past several decades, the vast majority of residents are a mixture of Inuit and Danish peoples. Their impacts are evident everywhere—in the shops of Greenland’s picturesque coastal towns, in the island’s distinctive language patterns, and in its mixed music, native costumes, and other cultural expressions (see Figure 1.2). Greenland is also connected to the geography of the rest of the continent of North America by its physical location and by current political issues. In 2006, it continues to be embroiled in a sovereignty dispute with Canada over the tiny Hans Island (located between Canada and Greenland in the Arctic region).

Mexico also still carries the vestiges of a past dominated by Spain blended with its many indigenous peoples and more recent migrants from Europe, Asia,
and Africa who have helped shaped MexAmerica’s distinctive landscapes and cultures. The people who live in Canada and the United States are the most multicultural, polyethnic, and polyracial of any part of North America. Canada’s major political and cultural distinctions are among the nation’s French-speaking and English-speaking population and its aboriginal First Nations, Aleut, and Inuit peoples. And since the 1960s, an increasingly large overlay of cultures and peoples have relocated to both Canada and the United States from Latin America, Asia, and Africa as well as a long list of European countries.

The largest (in area) of the countries that make up North America is Canada. It is also the closest trading partner of the United States and shares the longest peaceful political border in the world. Yet despite its
importance in world affairs and close proximity to the United States geographically, culturally, politically, and economically, the majority of the students who have taken our geography classes here in the United States seem to know very little about their own country’s nearest northern neighbor. Canada stretches 3730 miles (5500 kilometers) across the continent from the eastern edge of Newfoundland, west across the prairies to the Canadian Rockies, then across British Columbia to the Pacific coast. Seven percent of Canada is covered with lakes and rivers and it has three of the world’s 20 longest rivers. Overall Canada controls about 25 percent of the world’s freshwater resources. Politically, Canada is divided into ten provinces and three northern territories. Its more than 30 million people mostly reside in towns and cities located near the border with the United States (Figure 1.3).

Canada currently has the highest rate of immigration (as a percent of total population) among the world’s industrialized nations. To address the needs
of foreign-born newcomers during the past 25 years or so, the Canadian government has allocated generous funding for immigrant and refugee resettlement efforts and also funded numerous studies of the settlement patterns, social processes, and adjustment experiences of Canada’s foreign-born residents. Indeed, the word “multiculturalism” was first coined in Canada in the 1970s as a part of its many diversity policy initiatives.

As in all other parts of North America, Canada also has a long and colorful history of the settlement and survival of a diverse group of First Nations aboriginal people. In 1999, the new territory of Nunavut was approved by the Canadian government, a remote but quite large area of land in Canada’s Far North. It is the only political region populated and governed entirely by indigenous peoples on the North American continent (Figure 1.4).

As mentioned above, the United States is the second largest nation in North America. Its large land area is divided into 48 coterminous (or continental) states and two states, Hawai‘i and Alaska, that are located far from the other states. This division is a result of the expansionist policies of the United States government and a desire to secure land at some distance from its originally bounded area. This expansion was dictated by a long held belief in manifest destiny, the quirks of history, the desire to exploit natural resources in Alaska, and the promising boon of tourism dollars in Hawai‘i.

The United States has a system of government that is based more loosely on the British than the Canadian system. In both nations, the legal systems specifically provide for separation of powers between the federal governments on the one hand and state or provincial governments on the other. Regional and provincial governments are much more self-sustaining in Canada than are state or the few regional governments in the United States. As shown on the diagram in Figure 1.5, both Canada and the United States have a multi-tiered system of government with power flowing from the federal level at the top down to city governments at the bottom. One major difference in the political systems of these two North American countries is that the Dominion of Canada is more closely connected to Great Britain as one of its Commonwealth countries than the United States. As such, the queen of England is the primary figurehead over Canadian affairs of state with a Prime Minister serving as the elected, in-residence
Putting Geography Back on the Map

If you’re an American student, there’s a very good chance that you haven’t taken a geography class in many years. In contrast, in Canada, Greenland, and Mexico, geography is taught to students more thoroughly during their precollege years. We applaud the political and educational decision makers in these and other countries in the world for realizing that it is critically important to enhance global awareness in students, as well as their understanding of local and regional people and places.

In this era of intensified interconnections and relationships on Earth, we believe that geography is one of the most important subjects in any school curriculum. Each of us is linked to other people and places in the world in ways we may take for granted as we shop for groceries imported from around the world, eat in “foreign” restaurants, make cell phone calls to relatives and friends who formerly were out of reach. We use transportation connections that link the world’s peoples as never before. In sum: Bring on more geography!

In the United States, geography has been a part of the much broader social studies curriculum for more than five decades. The result has been minimal attention to geographic learning for most American students for a long time period. Thus, your parents may have never learned much geography either. This problem was attacked head on by a group of K–12 teachers, administrators, and geography professors beginning in the mid-1980s and it continues to this day. The revolution in geography education was funded in large part by the National Geographic Society and was carried out by teacher-members of statewide Geographic Alliances that were organized in all the states of the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada. It provides teachers with lesson plans, workshops, and institutes that offer support to learn (or re-learn) geographic concepts, themes, skills, and perspectives to teach to their own students. With help from other professional organizations such as the National Council for Geographic Education, the American Geographical Society, the Association of American Geographers, and the Geographic Education National Implementation Project, as well as the National Geographic Society, the impacts of this revolution continue to be felt today, but only in selected school districts and classrooms across the nation.

Why Study Regional Geography?

Working in tandem with the activist Geographic Alliance movement nationwide are other ongoing efforts to bring geography back to American schools at the political level. A few states such as Colorado require completion of a high school geography class for admission into state universities. The geographic education revolution also made big inroads into spreading the word about the importance of geographic literacy and learning by producing a set of national standards, Geography for Life: National Standards in Geography. Students’ knowledge and use of the standards are evaluated in classrooms with national examinations for 4th, 8th, and 12th graders as part of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). They also provide content for the development and national dissemination of a College Board-approved Advanced Placement Human Geography course. In sum, some of the readers of this textbook who may have taken a geography class before enrolling in this one may have been the direct beneficiaries of this effort to bring geography back to the schools, and to the attention of the nation and world. If so, then the effort to bring geography back into school classrooms is making progress.

But much remains to be done. American students continue to rank near the bottom on Gallup Poll assessments and other international examinations in geography. In the latest test, many students were unable to answer questions about the location of Mexico as America’s nearest southern neighbor. If you’re one of these typical students who have never taken a geography class at the high school, college, or university level before, we’re especially pleased to have you using this text. And for others of you who have benefited from the effects of the geographic education revolution by completing a course or courses before entering higher education—or even by declaring your interest in becoming a geography major or a professional geographer after graduation—your knowledge and understanding of core geographic concepts, themes, and skills will no doubt prove invaluable in mastering the contents of this textbook.

Why Study Regional Geography?

This text was written to help support geography courses that focus on the regional geography of North America. There are two broad types of geography—physical geography and human geography. Along with these overarching subfields of the discipline are courses that integrate information and skills from both human and physical geography with a focus on particular places in the world. This approach is called regional geography. Most colleges and universities offer human, physical, and regional courses as well
as techniques courses such as cartography and Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

This textbook is grounded in conceptually based regional geography—the study of selected parts of Earth that are defined and identified by certain unifying characteristics. North America as a continent is a region unto itself. And this large region also can be divided into political regions such as its four nation-states—Greenland, Canada, the United States, and Mexico. In turn, these four large political regions can be divided into other, smaller regions such as the Pacific Northwest, Mexamerica, and French Canada. This regionalizing approach will help make it easier for you to learn and apply the content of this book and make studying the geographies of each place more manageable.

Likewise, within many of these varying levels of regions and subregions are parts of other well-bounded and popularly known places such as the Sun Belt or the San Francisco Bay Area. These places may also be called regions because they have certain characteristics in common that help identify their distinctive geographies. The government also uses a regional approach to divide up territories such as its census regions, national parks and wilderness regions, and watershed regions. One example of these “regions within regions” at the urban level is shown on the image in Figure 1.6.

Geographers often divide regions into formal, functional, and vernacular regions. A formal region usually has an institutional or political identity and distinct boundaries (e.g., the New England region) whereas a functional region is described according to its interconnections or usefulness (e.g., the Salt Lake City Metropolitan Area). Vernacular regions such as “Dixie” are unified and distinctive areas defined by insiders who understand clearly their regional boundaries. These three types of regions can be homogeneous where their coalescent criteria are generally uniform (as in agricultural, religious, or linguistic regions), or nodal regions (where a core or central zone is most important, such as in an urban region).

![Figure 1.6 The San Francisco Bay region viewed from space.](image)
Approaches Used in This Book

This textbook, like many other regional geography books, is divided into a set of preliminary chapters called thematic chapters. Each of these deals with a particular theme such as **political economy** or **historical geography**. These thematic chapters are followed by a series of regional chapters that focus on one particular part or region of North America. **Chapters 1 through 4 and our concluding chapter (Chapter 19) are thematic chapters. Chapters 5 through 18 are regional chapters that focus on the regions that we have defined for this book.**

We begin with geographic regions that are located along or near the north Atlantic coast and then move across the continent from east to west using a broad brush approach (with a few “up close and personal” focal points along the way). The regions that we have defined to be discussed in this text and shown in Figure 1.8 include:

- The Atlantic Periphery
- Quebec
- Megalopolis
- Great Lakes/Corn Belt
- Inland South
- Coastal South and Caribbean
- Great Plains
- Rocky Mountains
- Intermontane West
- MexAmerica
- California
- The Pacific Northwest
- Hawai'i
- Far North

It is critically important to keep in mind that we could have defined the boundaries of the regions in this text differently by using the criteria that form the best and most cohesive units of space to determine the regional boundaries for Chapters 5–18. That is one of the exciting things about being a geographer! North America is a large and complex place with many different internal physical and human characteristics. Therefore, other geographers, historians, and popular writers have divided it into regions based on different criteria—and ended up with very different results. One of the best known examples of this process is the cultural regions of North America discussed in journalist Joel Garreau’s book, *The Nine Nations of North America* (1981), shown in Figure 1.7.

Regional boundaries we have selected for these chapters are based on a combination of physical, political,
cultural, and economic boundaries as shown in Figure 1.8 below. The unifying criteria that help create boundaries for these regions are political, cultural, physical, or economic—or some combination of these.

Along with a discussion of a set of primary topics included in each of the following chapters, we also embed a detailed coverage of key geography concepts and themes throughout. To help you discern which of these are focused upon in each of the chapters, we identify them by using bolded text to set them off from the rest of the narrative. We also list all of the concepts discussed in each chapter with definitions at the end of the book in a Glossary. These conceptual links and lists should help you understand and be able to apply all of the key concepts embedded within the National Geography Standards—and prepare you to enroll in another geography course or succeed as a geography major or minor at your university.

We begin by presenting you with some thematic background information on the entire North American continent in the following chapter on physical geography. Chapter 3 then provides a broad overview of the historical settlement of North America, beginning with a discussion of the cultures, economies, social systems, and settlement patterns of its diverse aboriginal peoples, and then tracing the arrival and impact of later Euro-American colonizers and settlers. Chapter 4 presents an overview of the political economy of North...
America. Here we discuss the impacts of globalization and other theories and concepts related to the politics and economies of the continent, along with a discussion of the four levels of economic production—primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary.

As mentioned earlier, one of this book’s innovations is including the Mexican borderlands and Greenland in our coverage of the geography of North America. We hope you find the inclusion of these often lesser known areas educational—as well as inducements to future travel to places you might not have considered within your reach before reading this text.

As a conclusion to this first chapter, we invite you to examine and reflect upon some of the other ways we might have divided up North America in this book. As shown on the maps in Figures 1.9 and 1.10, there are many different ways this could have been accomplished.

The first map divides up the continent according to its landform regions, while the second map divides the same land area into agricultural regions. As you can see, regions are a shifting concept and the regionalizing of North America is not only ever changing but also can be accomplished in all kinds of different ways.

We invite you to begin your study of the geography of North America by taking another look at the map shown in Figure 1.8 earlier in this chapter. What regions might you change if you were asked to update this book? How and why are your regions different or the same as the regions shown on the maps in this chapter, and in some of the other regions mapped in later chapters? These and other related questions will guide our discussion and analyses of some of the peoples and places in North America in the chapters that follow.
Chapter 1 Introduction

Suggested Readings


Allen, James, Doreen Massey, and Allan Cochrane. 1998. Rethinking the Region. London: Routledge. Commentary on regions and regionalizing space and place by a team of British geographers who very effectively integrate theory and empirical data in their research.


Statistics Canada. Ottawa, Canada: Queens Printer, annual. The Canadian counterpart to the U.S. Census Bureau that publishes invaluable statistical analyses based on the Canadian census at different time periods.


**Web Sites**

The American Geographical Society
http://www.amergeog.org/

Association of American Geographers
http://www.aag.org

The National Council for Geographic Education
http://www.ncge.org

The National Geographic Society
http://www.nationalgeographic.com

The Royal Canadian Geographical Society (Société géographique royale du Canada)
http://www.rhaps.org/rcgs/