

Physical Geography

In the highland areas of Middle America, the mountains tend to be low-lying and rarely have snow-covered peaks. These areas differ considerably from the Andes, which form the world's longest and highest mountain chain. The Andes extend over 4,000 miles in length, with peaks ranging from 10,000 to almost 23,000 feet high. The Andes' highest peak, Mt. Aconcagua in Argentina, is 22,831 feet high. By comparison, the world's highest peak, Mt. Everest in the Himalayas, measures 29,028 feet. The Sierra Madres are shorter ranges than the Andes and they have a lower median altitude.

Unlike the United States and Canada, Latin America has relatively few freshwater lakes. Lake Nicaragua in Nicaragua, Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela, and Lake Titicaca on the border of Peru and Bolivia are three principal freshwater lakes. These lakes usually have large cities or populations on their shores and are primarily used for fishing, transportation, and occasional irrigation. Lake Titicaca is the world's highest lake.

The Amazon, the Parana, and the Rio Grande are three of the most important Latin American rivers. The Amazon is the largest river in the world in terms of water volume discharged at its mouth (about 7,500,000 cubic feet per second). Extending about 3,900 miles into the Brazilian rainforest, it is second in length only to the Nile. With its many tributaries, the Amazon is a natural highway to the interior. Since much of the interior is covered with thick tropical rainforests, the Amazon is sometimes the only route into certain areas. The Parana River originates in the Brazilian Highlands, follows the southeastern border of Paraguay, then flows into the Atlantic north of Argentina. This waterway is

especially important to Paraguay, which is one of two landlocked countries in Latin America. The Rio Grande, which in Mexico is called the Rio Bravo, separates Mexico from the United States. Its importance lies in being the barrier that separates Latin America from *El Norte* (the North, specifically the United States) and what is perceived to be a better life.

History gives the Galapagos and Falkland Islands their fame. Charles Darwin based his theory of evolution on the animal life and fossil remains of the Galapagos, which lie far off the coast of Ecuador. The Falklands, or Islas Malvinas, became the focus of international attention in 1982 when Argentina and the United Kingdom went to war over jurisdiction of the islands, which are off the coast of Argentina.

The Pampas, or great plains, is a flat area with a few rolling hills. *Gauchos*, or South American cowboys, made the Pampas famous, raising the livestock that has made Argentina a leading world producer of meat and leather products. Today the Pampas is also a major world producer of wheat.

The Chaco, which covers parts of Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, and Bolivia, is an alluvial lowland plain that is basically infertile and known for its dramatic climatic contrasts, having both humid tropical areas and semi-arid regions. Fewer than 500,000 people live in this area; consequently, there is little economic activity.

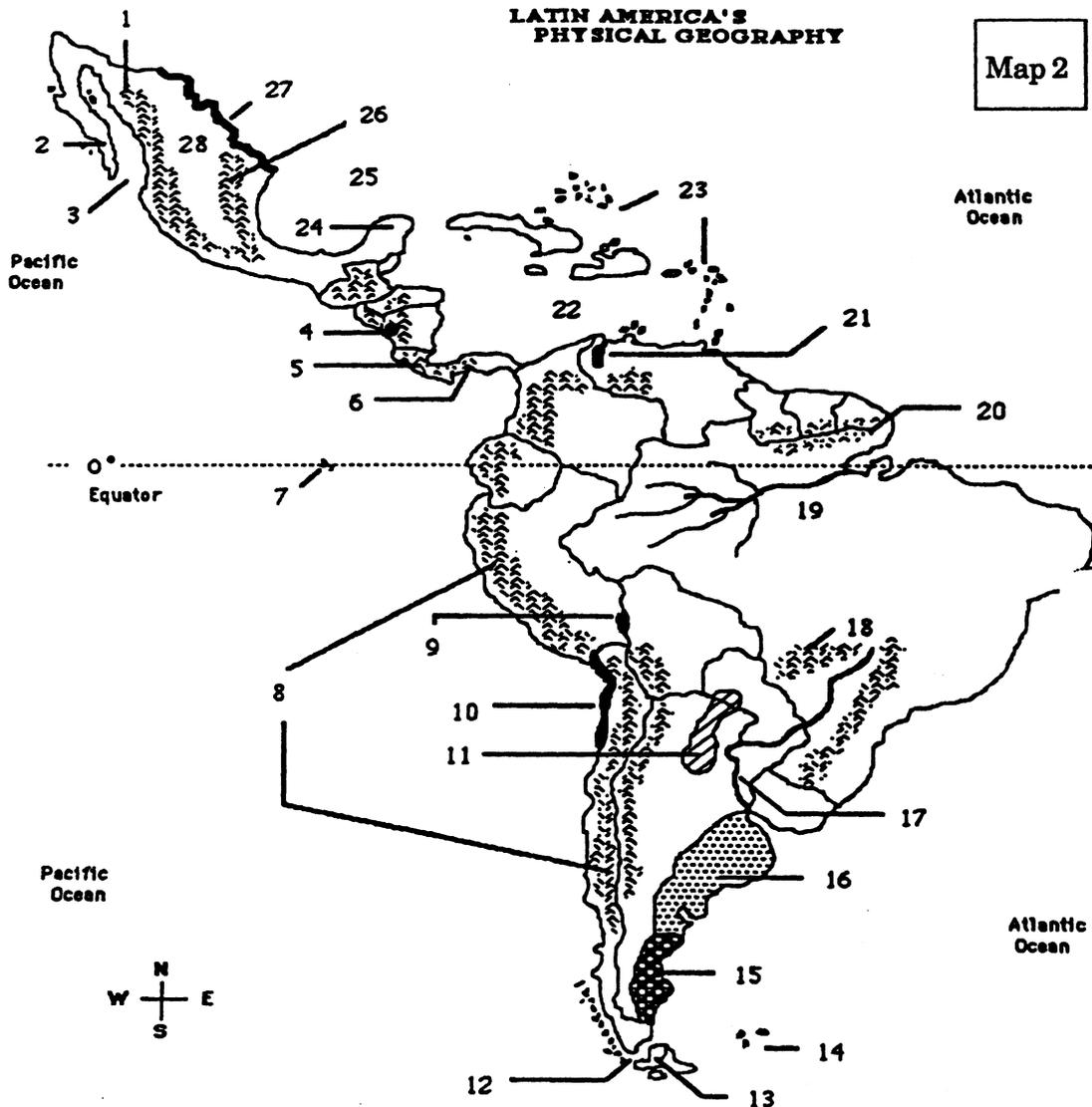
Patagonia, in southern Argentina, is essentially an arid plateau region with wide valleys that extend from the Andes to the Atlantic in the far south. These valleys have floors as deep as 300 feet below the surface of the tableland. Originally used for sheep and cattle grazing, the region has more recently become an important military site with several Argentine

HANDOUT #2 — continued

installations. In addition, there has been talk of relocating Argentina's national capital to Patagonia, although Buenos Aires is still the capital today.

The Atacama Desert in northern Chile ranks as one of the world's driest places. In some sections of this arid plateau, rain has never been recorded. This desert consists of sand, lava, and

a series of salt basins with practically no vegetation except for an occasional oasis and certain irrigated areas. It is, however, the site of extensive nitrate deposits, the mining of which was highly important beginning in the 1850s. Nitrate is used in fertilizers, explosives, and other chemicals.



Courtesy of:
 Lisa J. Barczak of Tulane University, in conjunction with Ann Marie Marlow of the University of Wisconsin

Key for Map 2

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Sierra Madre Occidental | 15. Patagonia |
| 2. Baja California | 16. Pampas |
| 3. Gulf of California | 17. Parana River |
| 4. Lake Nicaragua | 18. Brazilian Highlands |
| 5. Central American Highlands | 19. Amazon River |
| 6. Isthmus of Panama | 20. Guiana Highlands |
| 7. Galapagos Islands | 21. Lake Maracaibo |
| 8. Andes Mountains | 22. Caribbean Sea |
| 9. Lake Titicaca | 23. West Indies/Caribbean |
| 10. Atacama Desert | 24. Yucatan Peninsula |
| 11. Gran Chaco | 25. Gulf of Mexico |
| 12. Strait of Magellan | 26. Sierra Madre Oriental |
| 13. Tierra del Fuego | 27. Rio Grande River |
| 14. Falkland Islands | 28. Plateau of Mexico |