

Africa

Africa is the world's second largest continent. More than 50 countries make up the continent. More than one eighth of the world's population lives there.

Land and Climate

Africa's landscape is varied. The northern and western parts of the continent are generally lower and more level than the eastern and southern areas. Africa is the oldest continent. Therefore most of its mountains are not as high as those on other continents. They have been worn down over millions of years by wind and water.

Africa's most striking feature is a series of great rifts, or troughs, in the east known as the Rift Valley system. These rifts span two continents, from western

Asia through eastern Africa. In Africa they are deep, long, narrow valleys.

The world's longest river, the Nile, flows through northern Africa. The continent's other long rivers include the Congo in central Africa, the Niger in the west, and the Zambezi in the south. Eastern Africa has a chain of lakes known as the great lakes.

The continent is crossed midway by the equator. This means that most of Africa—the middle portion—lies within the tropics, an area where it is hot year-round. In the lowlands near the equator, rain falls throughout the year. To the north and south of this rainy area are large regions that have a rainy season followed by a dry season. It is very hot



A pair of giraffes is at home near Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.



and dry year-round in Africa's major deserts—the Sahara in the north and the Kalahari and the Namib in the south.

Plants and Animals

The vegetation growing in each region depends on the rainfall it receives. Near the equator, where it rains year-round, there are dense rain forests. These forests contain thousands of different types of trees and other plants. Between the rain forests and the great deserts to the north and south are the savannas. These are open grasslands scattered with trees such as acacias and baobabs. Few plants grow in the deserts.

A serious problem in the savanna is that the vegetation is being used up, leaving the land bare. As the population increases, more and more of the trees are being used for fuel and for building supplies. Some scientists are concerned that removing the vegetation may cause the savanna to become more desertlike.

Africa has many different kinds of animals, though their numbers were greatly reduced in the 1900s. This loss occurred because of overhunting and because large areas of their natural habitats were taken over for farming. Today many species are threatened with extinction. Several countries have set aside land to help protect wild animals. These wildlife preserves are home to such animals as elephants, giraffes, zebras, hippopotamuses, antelopes, lions, jackals, and hyenas. The rain forests support monkeys, bats, flying squirrels, gorillas, leopards, and mongooses. The native animals of northern Africa include types

of wild sheep and goat, the African red deer, and the jerboa (a small leaping animal like a gerbil). Fish, birds, and reptiles also are abundant.

People

Africa has the most physically varied population in the world. Most of the population consists of black peoples belonging to almost 3,000 different ethnic groups. In the north there are also large numbers of Arabs. Mainly in the south there are some descendants of Europeans who established colonies in Africa hundreds of years ago.

The number of languages spoken in Africa probably exceeds 1,000, though some are spoken by only a small number of people. Arabic is the major language of northern Africa. Most Africans who live south of the equator speak one of the many Bantu languages. In general, Islam is the religion of northern Africa



South African boys pose in front of a painting in Cape Town, South Africa.