

Environments of Africa



GEOGRAPHY SKILLS INTERPRETING MAPS

Location What type of environment is located just south of the Sahara?

Along the Niger's middle section is a low-lying area of lakes and marshes. This watery region is called the inland delta. Though it looks much like the area where a river flows into the sea, it is hundreds of miles from the coast. Many animals and birds find food and shelter in the area. Among them are crocodiles, geese, and hippopotamus. Fish are also plentiful.

West Africa's Climates and Plants

Four different regions make up the area surrounding the Niger River. These regions, which run from east to west, are like broad bands or stripes across West Africa. The entire area is warm, but rainfall varies from north to south. The amount of rainfall each region gets has an **impact** on what vegetation, or plant life, exists there.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY
impact effect, result



1 Desert The huge Sahara covers most of North Africa. Here, a traveler crosses a giant sea of sand.

The northern band across West Africa is the southern part of the Sahara. This huge expanse of sand and gravel is the world's largest desert. Temperatures can climb above 120°F. Rain is very rare.

The next band is the semiarid **Sahel** (sah-HEL), a strip of land that divides the desert from wetter areas. Although the Sahel is fairly dry, it has enough vegetation to support hardy grazing animals.

Farther south is a band of **savannah**, or open grassland with scattered trees. Tall grasses and shrubs also grow there, and grazing animals are common.

The fourth band gets heavy rain. Near the equator are **rain forests**, or moist, densely wooded areas. They contain many different plants and animals.

READING CHECK Summarizing What are West Africa's four climate and vegetation regions?

West Africa's Resources

West Africa's land is one of the region's resources. With its many climates, the land could produce many different crops. Among the traditional West African crops are dates raised in desert oases and kola



2 Savannah Much of Africa is covered by grasslands called savannah. Scattered across the savannah are clumps of trees like these acacia trees.

nuts, used for medicines, from the forests' trees. Along the Niger, farmers could use the water to grow many food crops.

Other resources were minerals. People who live mainly on plant foods, like many early Africans, must add salt to their diets. The Sahara was a source of this precious mineral. When ancient lakes there dried up, they left salt behind. Workers mined the salt by digging deep into the earth.

Gold was another mineral resource of West Africa. Although gold is soft and therefore useless for tools or weapons, it makes beautiful jewelry and coins. Gold came from the southern forests. Miners kept the exact locations of the gold mines a secret. To this day, no one knows exactly where the mines were located, but gold became a valuable trade good.

READING CHECK Finding Main Ideas What are some of West Africa's major resources?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW You have read about the physical geography of Africa. Next you will learn how physical features had an impact on culture and trade in early West Africa.



3 Rain Forest Thick rain forests like this one are found in central and western Africa. The rain forests' tall trees provide homes for many different animals.

Section 1 Assessment

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Online Quiz
KEYWORD: SQ7 HP5

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People **SS.7.4.1**

- a. Define** What is a savannah?

b. Contrast How might living in the Sahel be different from living in a rain forest?

c. Evaluate In which African climate region would you most like to live? Why?
- a. Identify** What were two of early West Africa's important mineral resources?

b. Explain How were these resources related to West Africa's physical geography?

c. Elaborate Why do you think miners kept the location of the gold mines a secret?

Critical Thinking

- 3. Summarizing** Create a chart like the one below. Use it to describe the characteristics of West Africa's four climate regions.

Climate region	Characteristics

FOCUS ON WRITING

- 4. Taking Notes on West Africa's Geography** Review this section and take notes on the geography of West Africa. Remember that part of this land is your character's daily environment. What does he or she see every day? What challenges does the environment present?

Trade and West Africa

As the people of West Africa grew more food, communities had more than they needed to survive. West Africans began to trade the area's resources with buyers who lived thousands of miles away.

Desert Trade

For a long time, West Africans had ventured into the desert for trade. However, those early travelers could only make short trips from oasis to oasis. Their horses couldn't go far without water.

In the AD 200s, the situation changed. At about that time, Romans started to use camels to carry goods throughout northern Africa. These long-legged animals could store water and energy in their bodies for long periods of time. They could also carry heavy loads.

With camels people could cross the Sahara in two months. Traders formed caravans to make the trip. A North African people called the Berbers used their knowledge of the desert to lead the caravans. Even with camels and the Berbers' skills, crossing the Sahara was dangerous. Supplies could run out, thieves could attack, and caravans could lose their way.

Trade in Gold and Salt

Despite these dangers, West Africa's gold and salt mines became a source of great wealth. Camels carried salt from the mines of the Sahara to the south to trade for gold. Traders then took the gold north, to Europe and the Islamic world. Along with gold and salt, traders carried cloth, copper, silver, and other items. They also bought and sold human beings as slaves.

Some of the places where people gathered to trade grew into towns. Timbuktu (tim-buk-TOO), for example, began as a camp for traders in about 1100. Within

two centuries, it would become a bustling city and a center of culture and learning. It would lie at the center of great empires that rose to power through the riches of the trans-Saharan trade.

READING CHECK Generalizing What trade goods were a source of West Africa's wealth?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW Families and religion were central to early West African cultures. When West Africans developed iron technology, communities grew. Trade in gold and salt expanded into a wider area. In the next chapter, you will read about the West African empires based on this trade.

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Online Quiz

KEYWORD: SQ7 HP5

Section 2 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People HSS 7.4.2

- a. Identify** What are two groups to which a person in early West Africa may have owed loyalty?

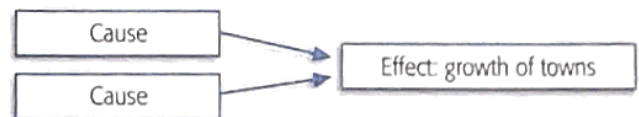
b. Analyze How did **animism** reflect what was important to early West African peoples?
- a. Describe** How did the use of iron change farming?

b. Make Inferences What evidence do you think historians have for how the Nok people lived?
- a. Identify** What animal made trade across the Sahara easier?

b. Summarize In what directions did the main trade items of West Africa move?

Critical Thinking

- Identifying Cause and Effect** Draw a diagram like the one below. Use it to identify two reasons towns grew.



FOCUS ON WRITING

- Taking Notes on West Africa's Early Culture** Review this section and take notes on the early West Africans' way of life. This section covers more than one time period and location, so be sure to note when and where particular activities took place.